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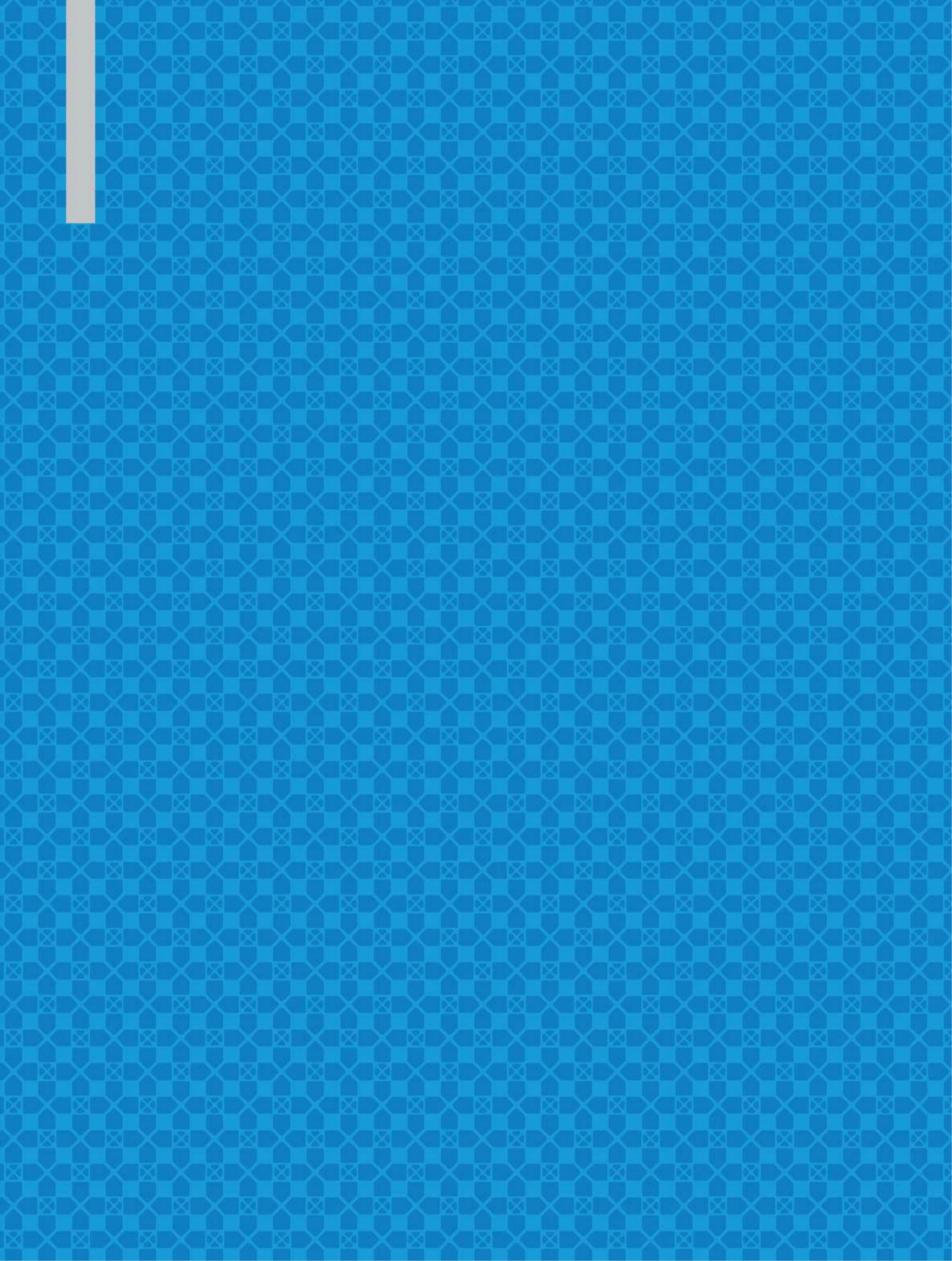
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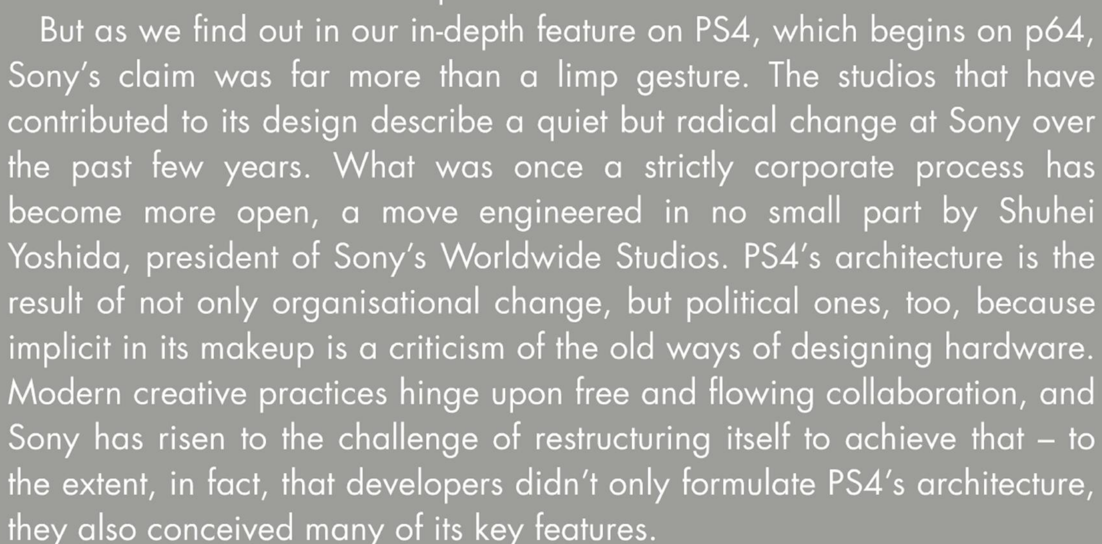
#253
MAY 2013



When developers become hardware designers



You'd be forgiven for thinking that Sony sounded as if it was delivering a shallow marketing line when it claimed that PS4 was designed in close collaboration with developers. Don't we always hear that sort of thing with the heralding of a new platform? Well, no. Just look to PS3. As capable as that console has steadily proven itself to be (just look at the beauty of *God Of War: Ascension* on p102), PS3 has never been a developers' machine, having been designed in an "ivory tower", as Guerrilla Games co-founder **Hermen Hulst** has put it.



But as we find out in our in-depth feature on PS4, which begins on p64, Sony's claim was far more than a limp gesture. The studios that have contributed to its design describe a quiet but radical change at Sony over the past few years. What was once a strictly corporate process has become more open, a move engineered in no small part by Shuhei Yoshida, president of Sony's Worldwide Studios. PS4's architecture is the result of not only organisational change, but political ones, too, because implicit in its makeup is a criticism of the old ways of designing hardware. Modern creative practices hinge upon free and flowing collaboration, and Sony has risen to the challenge of restructuring itself to achieve that – to the extent, in fact, that developers didn't only formulate PS4's architecture, they also conceived many of its key features.

The story behind the hardware's development is in some ways an acknowledgement of the fact that its fortunes – and, by extension, Sony's – lie in the hands of the developers that will make games for it. Look, too, to Sony's better terms for developers, such as in completely overhauling its concept submission process. It's an indication of a sea change that the videogame industry is currently undergoing, one in which game makers are increasingly calling the shots, putting the emphasis on creative power. And the ultimate winners in all of this? Players.



games





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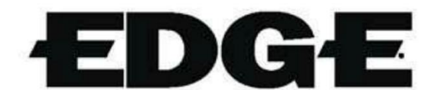
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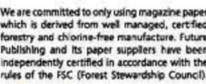
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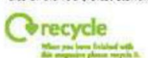
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WLEDGE

Crowdfunding has proven a fantastic source of both money and fans for videogame projects, but with its growth the market has quickly changed. As we discover in our feature on p10, Kickstarter (1) can still generate hundreds of thousands of dollars for certain development stars, but it has started to leave less well-known but no less talented developers with unfunded projects. Has Kickstarter's bubble burst? Crowdfunding hasn't yet had the same impact in Japan, but that's not the only reason why indie development there hasn't found its own voice. BitSummit (2), which we attend on p14, is an attempt to make a name for indies in Tokyo, and it has already given new confidence to creators who feel the Japanese game industry fails to support their vision. That's not a problem for modders, however, who have the Nexus network (3) of sites as a resource. We speak to owner Robin Scott about the challenges of running a modding empire and the future of the form on p16, before meeting some of the entrants of our Get Into Games Challenge (4) on p20. In Soundbytes on p22, we hear how Richard Garriott (doesn't) think he's the best game designer, and why game design makes Suda 51 (5) feel horny. And in My Favourite Game on p24, comedian and presenter Dara O Briain (6) explains the art of making games funny and the value of making the gravity gun noise.



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game news and views

Cutting pledge

Have the multimillion dollar successes on Kickstarter taken independent developers out of the game?

Back in February 2012, some 87,142 people pledged $3,336,371 to *Broken Age*'s (previously *Double Fine Adventure*) Kickstarter and changed the landscape of crowdfunding for videogames. Earlier successes – stealth game *Blink*, iOS life sim *Star Command*, a NASA-backed MMOG – typically belonged to students, indie developers and experimental types with goals ranging from $1,000 to $30,000. But almost by accident, Double Fine proved it was possible to fund much bigger games by taking your pitch straight to players.

Since Double Fine made eight times its original $400,000 goal, Kickstarter has become a space that benefits major developers and established names most; of the $56 million pledged in Kickstarter's videogames category in 2012 $30 million was shared between just 12 projects, with $8.5 million going to Ouya alone. The remaining 11 include *Broken Age*, InXile's *Wasteland* sequel, Uber's *Planetary Annihilation*, *Broken Sword*, Obsidian's *Baldur's Gate* homage and a pseudo-remake of *Populous* from Peter Molyneux's 22 Cans. The effect, some argue, has been to marginalise smaller devs with modest funding goals.

"Kickstarter is becoming a burned out, cynical market that can't support the kinds of projects we're working on," says Eerie Canal's **Steven Kimura**, an industry veteran from Harmonix and Irrational turned independent. Kimura priced his game, *Dreadline*, at $167,000. It attracted just over $23,000 in pledges. "It's disheartening for me to see some rehash of a game that was popular 20 years ago get funded," he goes on. "I get it, because that's a reflection of the retail market – all sequels – but those kinds of projects have really burned people out on Kickstarter for us."

There have been a number of micro-budgeted success stories. In May 2012, Eric Smith asked for $20,000 to fund iPad strategy game *Battle Of The Bulge* and the $37,000 his project attracted meant the title reached the App Store in December. The two-man team behind *FTL: Faster Than Light* asked for $10,000 in April, made $200,000, and published in September. But months later, pitches have grown more professional, the studios behind them have grown bigger and many developers suspect backers have become wary of mid-range games.

"Kickstarter is becoming a cynical market that can't support the kinds of projects we're working on"

"I'm wondering if people are waiting to see what happens with the Kickstarters that got backed," says **Stephen Hewitt** of Blazing Griffin Games, developers of *The Ship: Full Steam Ahead*, which fell £110,000 short of its £128,000 goal in December. "I think there's a concern with indie projects – and that's exactly what Kickstarter should be for – that maybe you don't have the structure or the capability to make the game, and the more games that fail, the more people will be wary."

"There are a lot of irresponsible pitches," says Kimura. "I've seen open-world RPGs aiming for $50,000 and raising $150,000, but here's the thing: you can't make that game for a 150 grand either. I think you're going to start seeing that a lot of those projects aren't going to get done, and that will hit Kickstarter hard."





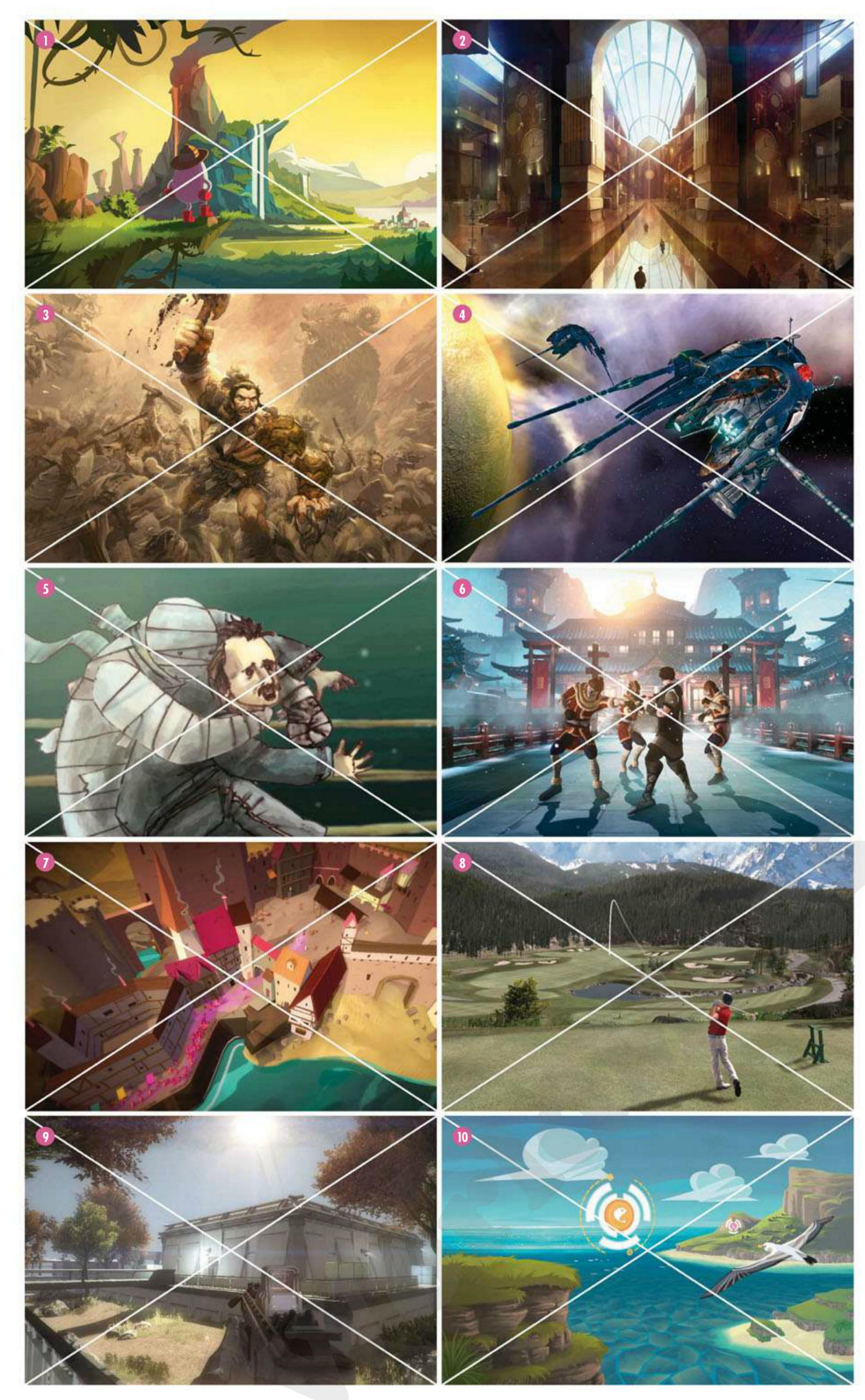
From top: Hidden Path's CEO, Jeff Pobst, and director of sales and operations at Perfect Parallel, Andrew Jones

But Hidden Path CEO **Jeff Pobst** isn't convinced by some developers' diagnosis of Kickstarter fatigue. "People were talking about that back in May and June last year!" he says. "I don't think it's happened yet. I don't hear anyone saying, 'I put money in on this but I'm worried they won't make their date.'" Hidden Path's own Kickstarter for *Defense Grid 2* fell short of its million dollar stretch goal but easily met its $250,000 target in August. Pobst has his own explanation for Kickstarter's high-profile failures: they were, simply, down to mistakes.

While Hidden Path's Kickstarter wasn't a failure, there were problems with timing – it launched in the same week as the Penny Arcade and Ouya Kickstarters – and customer service. According to Kickstarter, the average project attracts around 200 backers; Hidden Path was aiming for 20,000 and the sheer numbers quickly became a burden. "Community management is time consuming," says Pobst. "But customer service is even more time consuming." Selling on Kickstarter meant hundreds of high-maintenance backers wanted updates on the status of their goods.



Golf-focused developer Perfect Parallel identified another problem behind its failure – one rooted in its audience as much as promotion. "The average person who plays golf online doesn't have a clue what Kickstarter is about," says **Andrew Jones**, the studio's operations director. The *PerfectGolf* Kickstarter aimed for $300,000, but made under $20k. "We had a lot of people saying, 'You've gotta show us a finished product before we'll



KICKED DOWN
1 The Oliver twins' *Dizzy Returns* was put on Kickstarter with sketches and ideas.
2 *The Ship: Full Steam Ahead*'s failure can be attributed to a poor sell and a January start date.
3 A strong pitch couldn't save *Wildman* when Gas Powered Games let multiple staff go mid-campaign.
4 *Skyjacker* failed but developers Digitilus returned with its Starship Constructor app and part-funded the game for $30,000.
5 *Dreadline*'s pitch showed too little of the game and asked a lot from backers.
6 *Kung Fu Superstar* had a comprehensive pitch, but launched opposite competitors who claimed most of the headlines.
7 *Death Inc.* also went live the same day as two other major games and failed its Kickstarter.
8 *PerfectGolf*'s pitch video sought to sell a project on the tech behind the game rather than the game.
9 *Interstellar Marines* made just $158,000 in the same month Chris Roberts' *Star Citizen* made $2.1 million.
10 Educational game *Aero* seemed to have only limited appeal in a market gamers treat as a shopfront for preordering games







From top: Steven Kimura of Eerie Canal; Blazing Griffin co-founder and head of design, Steven Hewitt; and Uber CTO Jon Mavor

invest,' but the whole point of Kickstarter is that there isn't a finished product.

"If we had understood Kickstarter better, we would have set a much lower goal," he goes on. "We would still have made $300,000 a stretch goal, because once you've hit your goal, the number of people who participate goes up significantly; everyone knows they're going get something."

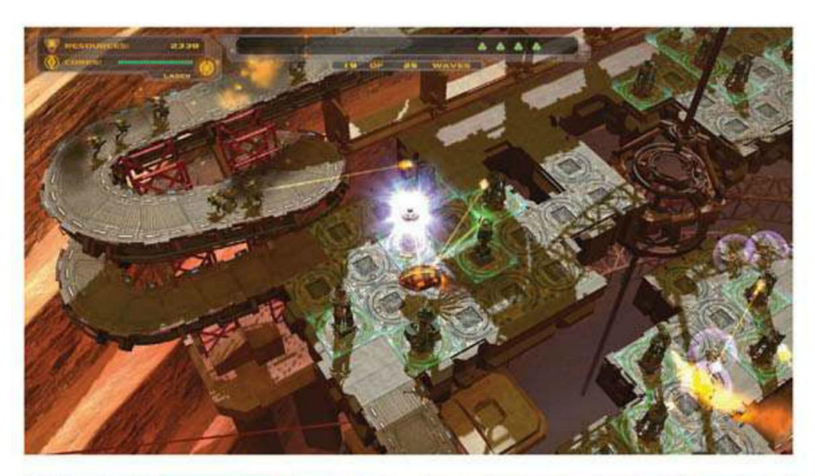
And that is one of the mistakes *PerfectGolf* shares with *Defense Grid 2*, *Dreadline* and *The Ship*'s sequel. If there's one thing everyone agrees on, it's that in the gaming space, Kickstarter backers are now more interested in products than projects. "There are people who want to back your team, but their number isn't great enough to make your game," says Pobst. "We sold *Defense Grid 2* as an idea, but Kickstarter is inundated by ideas. On Kickstarter, I think what you have to sell is a visual."

"I think we should have shown more gameplay," says Kimura. "We showed some and it was all real, but generally by this point in development your demo is the hackiest mishmash of game and fakery. We spent 90 per cent of our resources developing a game, but what you need is an awesome video. It's more important to get people excited than inform them about development."

This is a very different world for most game developers, one where they become their own publisher, marketer and, critically, their own shopfront. "That's how the taxman sees it," says Jones. "Kickstarter is taken as presales, so you pay tax on every penny you earn as if it's retail revenue."

If customers see Kickstarter as a shop, and it's taxed like a shop, it's almost certainly smart to treat it like a shop where customers want a clear view of what they're buying, even if it is a mishmash of game and fakery. The most successful Kickstarters – those early prototypical campaigns aside – have all focused on the product rather than the team behind it.

Certainly, that explains the high-profile failure of Blitz Games' *Dizzy Returns* Kickstarter in November, which tried to raise £350,000 with a handful of sketches and an interesting idea. "I think we should have spent more time stating our vision, doing more artwork and doing a gameplay demo," says Blitz's chief technical officer **Andrew Oliver**. "We rushed into it, because we wanted to get in there before Christmas while there was excitement around the UK launch of Kickstarter. People like David Braben and Peter Molyneux jumped in at the same time – I don't know whether that's a good thing or not – but we based ours too much on nostalgia and we didn't project our vision of just how much we were planning on bringing Dizzy forward."





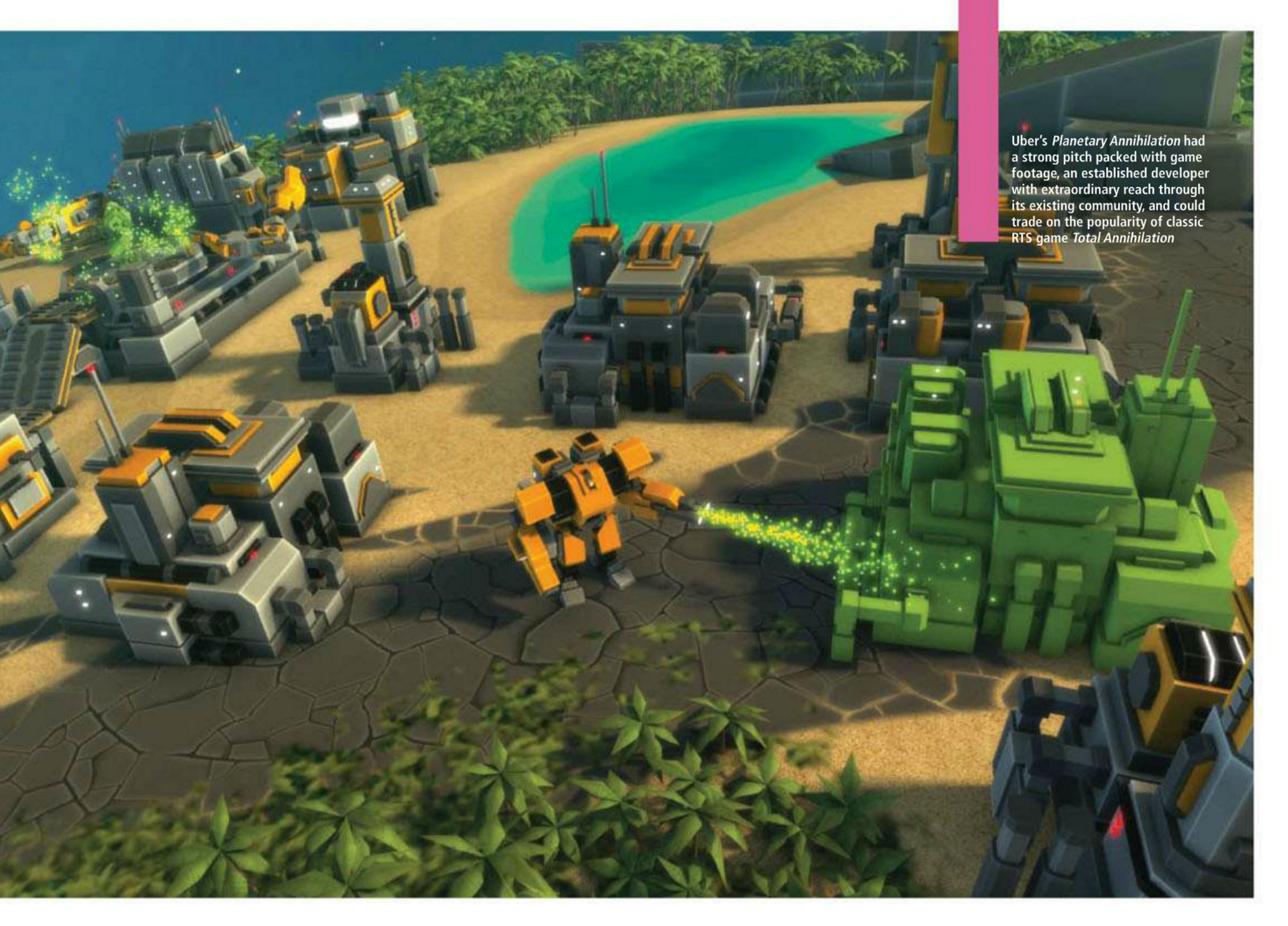


***Defense Grid*'s *Containment* expansion (top) was funded as part of *Defense Grid 2*'s Kickstarter but Hidden Path is still a long way from the vision of *Defense Grid 2* it sold in its Kickstarter pitch (above-left, -right)**

Pitches have become so professional, so complete and so loaded with game footage that even a major studio can fail if it makes the basic mistake of not following suit. The most common request potential backers had of Blitz was to see game footage, and it wasn't until Frontier's *Elite: Dangerous* Kickstarter page added game footage that it started to see significant investment. "I would say you need to put up to a third of your total budget on the line before you even launch your Kickstarter," says Oliver. "If your budget is £100,000, you're looking at putting 30,000 down just to show your vision, and then you're asking for the money to finish it. The community is much more receptive to that. People want faster returns and a clear idea of what they're getting."

The perfect pitch, then, sells a product. It can't launch opposite a high-profile game from a major studio, it needs a release date in the very near future, and it should have a modest goal with ambitious stretch goals. It helps if it's from a team that has already shipped several games and that has the production resources to put together a professional pitch that includes polished footage of the game. It's the last of those which has excluded mid-level indies in the months since Uber's *Planetary Annihilation* Kickstarter back in September.

"That was the perfect Kickstarter," says Pobst. "They had a well encapsulated promise in an amazing video, they had a clear vision for the game and an eager fanbase. They had the pitch and the reach, and that's all you really need."



Uber's *Planetary Annihilation* had a strong pitch packed with game footage, an established developer with extraordinary reach through its existing community, and could trade on the popularity of classic RTS game *Total Annihilation*

"We identified three key areas you have to get right to be successful on Kickstarter, and when I say successful I mean make a million dollars or above," says Uber's chief technical officer, **Jon Mavor**. "One, your pitch has to be clear and easily understandable with a good hook, so you know what you're going to get if you support the project. Two, you have to prove you can execute on it. And three – and this is the most disturbing – you have to tap into nostalgia. That's disturbing, because not everybody has a property that fits; in fact, the reason we went with this project is because it has that connection to the past."

Planetary Annihilation's Kickstarter represented four months of work before the page even went live, and cost between $50,000 and $100,000 in salaries. "We had the infrastructure in place to do this, and it's not an incredible amount of money for a company of our size," says Mavor. "But it's a prohibitive amount of money if you're starting with nothing. Some kid in his basement is going to have a very difficult time raising a lot of money on Kickstarter without an unbelievable pitch, and that's just not realistic in a lot of cases.

"But I've talked to a lot of people in the industry who question whether studios our size belong on Kickstarter, because they think we have other means of raising the money. But no – we have no other means of raising this money. We can't finance it ourselves and venture capitalists will always want to manipulate the product to maximise profit, so that's not comparable either. Without Kickstarter there would be no game."

"Some kid in his basement is going to have a difficult time raising a lot of money on Kickstarter"

It's still possible to aim small with an original idea and be successful, though. Independent zombie game *Roam* asked for $40,000 and made a $100,000, while *Race The Sun* made its $20,000 goal, just barely. But between *Roam* and *Planetary Annihilation*, projects are somehow getting lost.

"For me, indie development is about making something creative and different," says Kimura. "I think that's what Kickstarter was supposed to be about, but I think that it's shifted, especially in the game space. Now it's just a shop, and I think that's the death of that platform. That's not what it's for."

"I'd argue we're just at the beginning of figuring out the kinds of games Kickstarter can support," says Mavor. "And it could go in a whole number of different directions. It could kinda burn everyone out as more projects fail and people lose interest, [or] it could be that everyone figures out the perfect pitch and it leads to its own monoculture. I don't know what's next for Kickstarter, but I would always ask, 'What are you passionate about? What do you want to make? Put it on Kickstarter and find out if there's a market for it.' I mean, why wouldn't you? In fact, why wouldn't a major publisher put their games up on Kickstarter before they even create them just to see what happens? Why not?" ■

FREE AND SINGLE

While a handful of videogames were funded through Kickstarter in 2010 and 2011, Kickstarter's own figures suggest *Broken Age* was the catalyst for growth in early 2012. But the games category – consisting of both board and videogames – is more often than not a loser's market. Of 2,796 projects, only 911 made their goal, and the biggest money makers were almost entirely established brands or sequels to cult games such as *Dreamfall* or *Carmageddon*. In 2013 the most successful Kickstarters launched so far are *American McGee's Akaneiro: Demon Hunters* at just $204,680 and InXile's *Torment: Tides of Numenera* which broke its $900,000 goal in just six hours.

Summit about Japan

The inaugural BitSummit, a gathering for Japan's indies, asks how local devs can go global

Japan's first prominent formal gathering for independent game developers was held on March 9 in Kyoto, and attracted close to 200 attendees. BitSummit was designed to galvanise Japan's indie scene, which suffers under a publisher-heavy infrastructure and low domestic demand for PC games.

"The event was aimed at developers and the media," says director **James Mielke**, AKA Milky or Milkman, who is also a producer at *PixelJunk* developer Q-Games. "When I asked media and developer friends what they thought of Japan's independent game development scene, and they told me they had no idea that one existed, I felt someone needed to do something about it."



James Mielke directed BitSummit, Japan's first prominent indie game developers event, in March

Japanese indie developers can drum up a healthy buzz at western events such as GDC, IGF and Gamescom, but in Japan there has been no real equivalent. While Tokyo Game Show offers booth space to newcomers, it's a show mostly dominated by major publishers.

"In Japan, there's rarely a chance to have this many developers get together and bounce around ideas and experiences. This has reinforced my confidence," says **Yohei Kataoka** of Crispy's Inc, the game director behind 2012's *Tokyo Jungle*. He made a presentation at BitSummit urging Japanese developers to "believe in your game and send it out into the world". In *Tokyo Jungle*'s case, it was only through word of mouth and after enthusiasm from western media that Sony decided to localise the game and release it in North America and Europe on PlayStation Network.

PC gaming has never been hugely popular among Japanese gamers, and console dev kits and licence fees are an expensive burden that indies must add to their development costs. Kickstarter is unavailable in Japan without a US or UK bank account, and the local equivalents, such as Kampsite and Readyfor, don't have nearly as much clout in the east as Kickstarter has in the west.



Steam has proven a godsend for western indie developers, but in Japan it has been a less attractive choice. As a PC platform where much of the content is in English, gamers in Japan barely even know it exists. And Japanese developers hoping to get their games onto Steam for a western audience face the Greenlight system, where a game must win over the English-speaking community before it can be sold on Steam, and at the risk of losing face if it fails.

"Greenlight is not very well suited to Japanese developers," says **Takumi Naramura** of developer Nigoro, whose *La-Mulana* recently got through Greenlight and is being prepared for Steam. "It would be a lot easier if Japanese publishers could make a deal to sell on Steam directly."

> "In Japan, there's rarely a chance to have this many devs get together and bounce around ideas…"

So if Steam is not yet the answer, what is? While WiiWare and DSiWare have their fans in Japan, they come with complex contracts, and many developers have opted instead for the freedom of iOS. "There are problems with going multiplatform," says **Daisuke 'Pixel' Amaya**, whose *Cave Story* has been ported to various PC, console and handheld platforms, but whose new title *Gero Blaster*, announced at BitSummit, is iOS only. "On Android, you have such a variety of hardware that it's impossible to check it works on all of them, and with the big consoles you have the problem of entering contracts with corporations. For a one-man operation, iOS is ideal."

With self-publishing promised on the next generation of PlayStation Store, Sony appears to be making a new commitment to support indie devs. But while the developers at BitSummit seemed intrigued, they were reluctant to rely on it. "If they were serious about bringing in indies, they would broadcast their developer meetings over the Internet. I think their main viewpoint is to maintain relations with existing publishers," says **Masaya Matsuura**, whose Kinect game *Haunt* was released in 2012 by Microsoft as part of a drive to win over Japanese players.

"Nintendo made a similar statement at GDC regarding indies on Wii U, but so long as we're expected to spend hundreds of thousands of yen on a dev kit, nothing will change," adds Naramura. When asked what Sony should do to make PS4 a more welcoming platform for indies, he explains: "If they made the dev kit open, we'd be able to plan better."

Potential solutions did emerge at BitSummit. Digital Development Management's Ben Judd explained how his agency can hook Japanese devs up with American partners so that they can use Kickstarter, while representatives from Steam, Unity and Epic Games were on hand to take questions. But more than anything, there seemed to be a consensus that getting everyone together in one room to knock around ideas was a great boost to the Japanese indie scene, and we're told BitSummit 2014 is likely. ■

Image Haruna Kawanishi



La-Mulana (above) has been successful in getting Steam approval. However, its indie developer, Takumi Naramura, doesn't believe that Steam's Greenlight system is well suited to Japanese indies' cultural sensibilities. Mielke (top) decided to bring the BitSummit event into being after the Japanese indie scene's low profile became apparent to him





Gero Blaster (above), Amaya's next game, will be iOS only. *Monken* (left) is inspired by the wrecking ball used in the Asama-Sanso incident



Image Dylan Cuthbert

BEST BITS

James Mielke, BitSummit's organiser, gives his highlights from the event



"My highlight was the tribute video that we dedicated to WARP founder Kenji Eno, who passed away a couple of weeks before BitSummit," says Mielke. "He was like a brother to me. So… I collaborated with my friends Ryan O'Donnell and Haruna Kawanishi on a farewell tribute.

"[And] the feedback we got [to BitSummit] was almost universally enthusiastic. One indie developer of note – Yoshiro Kimura of *Little King's Story* – said that before BitSummit he wasn't sure if he was on the right path. But because of the event, he said, 'Now I am proud to be a Japanese independent developer.'"



Mod nation

Nexus network creator Robin Scott on life behind modding's greatest empire


Robin Scott, director, Black Tree Gaming Ltd

Compared to the lawless hunter-gatherers of the average mod scene, the Nexus network is Ancient Rome. Infrastructure, learning and law have built an empire of some 31,000 modders, who serve over five million members. Ridiculed by some for its chainmail bikinis and attacked by the odd barbarian – not everyone shares its code of etiquette or respect for intellectual property – it's nonetheless a wonder of the gaming world. Hosting over 28,000 mods for *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* alone, its importance for developer Bethesda can't be overstated.

This makes it rather surprising that **Robin Scott**, the site's young entrepreneurial emperor, barely speaks to the company at all. "I saw how they just handed out the [modding] tools and set up a wiki, so I'm not going to get in their way," he tells us. "I really try not to contact them at all. Probably less than once a year I talk to [community lead] Matt Grandstaff, and usually it's just legal things. You can have this Sliding Doors scenario, where if I had bothered Bethesda a lot more and maybe done some advertising deals with them… But it's just something I don't want to get into. I don't want to bother them and I don't want them to bother me.

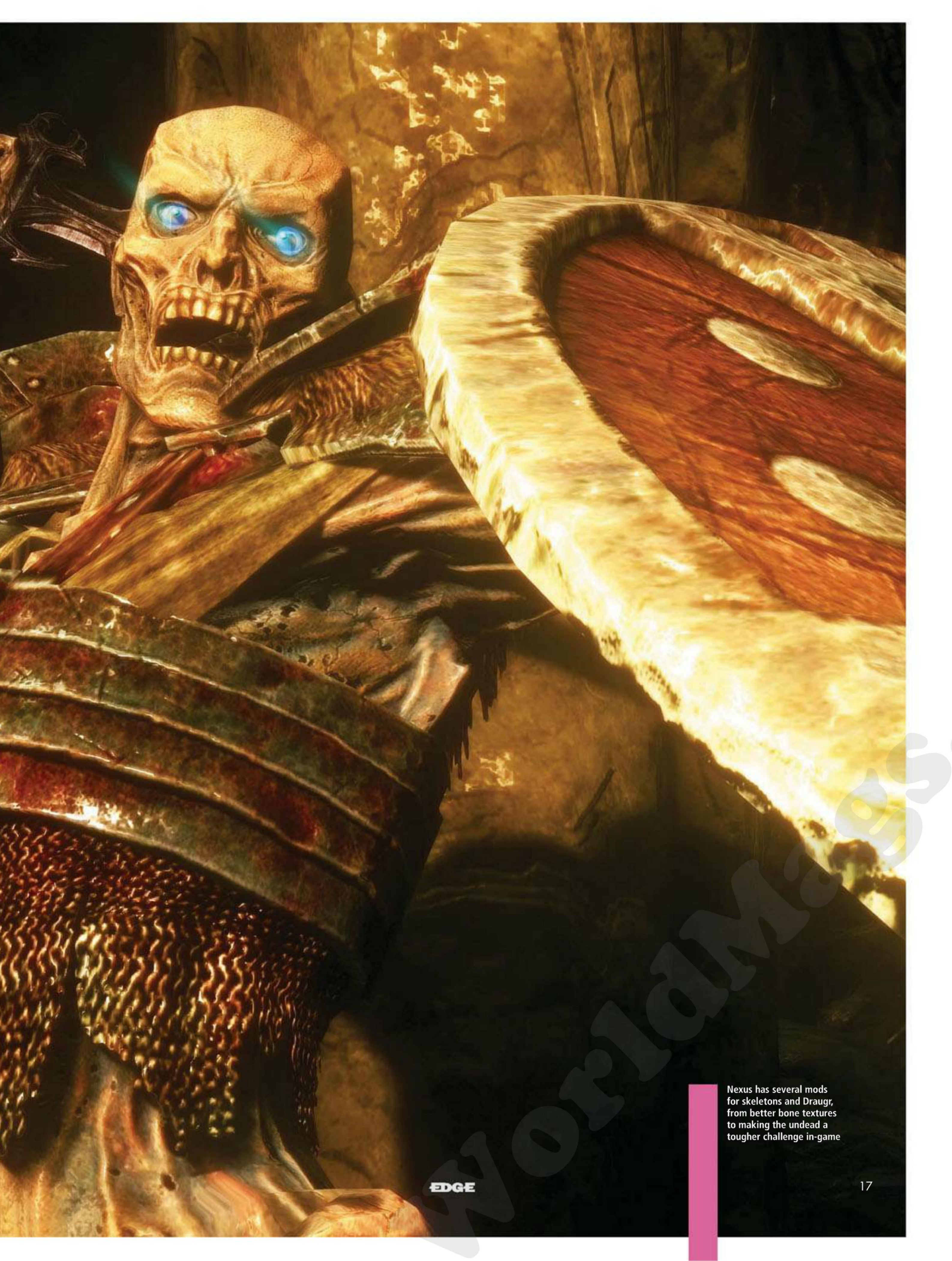
"It's almost like they say, 'Don't ask us too much, because if you do, you might open a can of worms you can't shut again.' Because there's a general feeling that if modding becomes too much of a hassle for them, past the obvious making of the tools, they're just going to wipe their hands clean and go, 'Fuck it. This is too much of a pain in the arse.' It's about trying to keep the community in check so they're not bothering Bethesda with what seem like petty squabbles."

> "If modding becomes too much of a hassle for Bethesda, they're just going to wipe their hands clean"

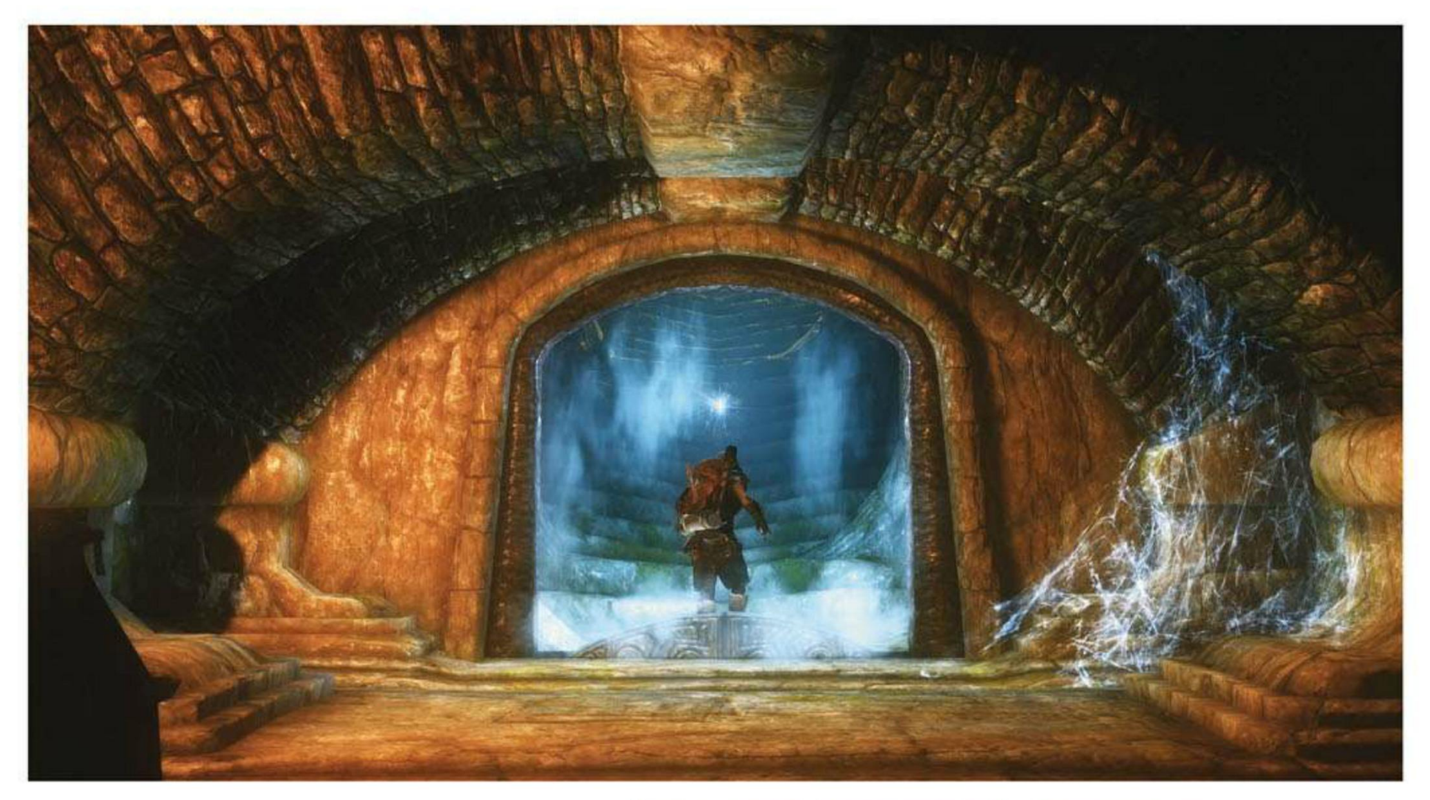
Scott got into the game website business when he was 15, and had built and sold two networks by the time the Nexus was rebranded in 2007. He is now 26. In the eyes of Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs, he is his company's fifth employee, alongside four programmers: two for the site and two for Nexus Mod Manager, an increasingly invaluable tool for all but the most hardcore modder.

"But I don't really see myself as an employee," he says. "I reply to all the private messages and emails because I want to keep the site going. As soon it becomes a pain, or I stop enjoying games, I think there might be an issue, but it's not. I've got three monitors in front of me. I've got shares running down the left-hand side of my monitor, because I do quite a lot of the share market. A lot of people say that I must be doing pretty well. And the Nexus does do pretty well, but the money it does pretty well with just goes right back into hiring more people and buying more servers."

Scott blogs regularly about the trials and tribulations of running such a



Nexus has several mods for skeletons and Draugr, from better bone textures to making the undead a tougher challenge in-game



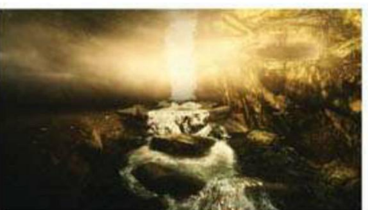
bandwidth-hungry monster without totally selling out. Things have certainly improved since the days when the sites would regularly crash, keeping him up in the dead of night restarting MySQL. Nowadays, bedtime is just after 2am, taking him past US peak time, and breakfast is at around 10:30am, after which he gets right back into the routine. He starts by checking emails and private messages, most concerned with site registration delays and the like, and three hours later he talks to the programmers.

"They'll show me what they've been doing, and I'll try to show them what I think it should look like. I'm working on a few new designs for the Nexus sites right now. Every once in a while I'll dabble in the code, but it's so far above me now that I can't just bring up a PHP file and start editing away. It just looks like Japanese to me," he admits.

The release of Nexus Mod Manager, which intercepts download clicks from the site, stores and then installs the mods for several supported games, roughly coincided with the announcement of Steam Workshop support for *Skyrim*. Scott is a *Dota 2* fanatic, but he's not shy of discussing just what makes Mod Manager so much healthier for the modding community than Valve's solution – and it goes far beyond extra control.

"Steam Workshop's been great for a lot of things, but if you look at the Valve games, they're making games like *Dota 2* that they'll give away for free, then they're making so much money on those microtransactions. The one thing I do buy is the subscriptions to the tournaments; that's brilliant, I really love that idea. But if you look at *TF2* and *Dota 2*, it's not the modding you and I know. It's not the modding Nexus does. It's a completely controlled, exclusive-to-Steam modding where they get to choose the mods that go on their service based on how well they think it will sell.

"If you say to mod authors that they can start making money out of their mods, are they going to be inclined to share their secrets, the stuff that they found that makes modding easier? That makes it great? Or are they going to hold on to it, because [that] means fewer people are doing what they're doing? The general dilemma we've got with modding at the moment, with what Valve are trying to do, is that people are now competing financially with other people and are going to be a lot less helpful." ■





Additional lighting effects are one of the easiest ways to add extra drama to *Skyrim*'s already epic locales. The trick is to apply these touches without slaying the framerate, which has been the focus of much work



Some mods are made specifically with taking screenshots in mind. You can turn the HUD off in the pause menu, but one mod binds the command to a single key







A few mods go further than simple improvements, overhauling *Skyrim* completely. Everything from climate to AI is fair game



SCREEN PRESENCE

A look at the tools used for modding *Skyrim*'s graphics



Ironically, the poster boy of *Skyrim* modding is among the few mods not hosted by the Nexus. Irascible but talented graphics programmer Boris Vorontsov has outlawed hosting of his ENB mod anywhere but on his own site. But the heavily customisable presets for it, which control the tone-mapping and lighting and shader effects behind the screenshots here, are hosted by the Nexus, where they feature in its Top 100.



Challenge accepted

Meet some of the teams hard at work on their entries to our Unity game creation competition

Over the past few weeks, teams and individuals have been producing games for this year's Get Into Games Challenge, in association with EA, which has the theme 'Do no harm'. As its April 15 deadline looms, we asked some of them how they're interpreting the theme.

"The name of our game is *No Ham*," says **Frankie Whelan** of Dublin-based Pewter Games, but the game's not just a fleshed-out pun. Players of this top-down puzzler will be attempting to prevent harm coming to their fellow hams as they escape from imprisonment, *Lemmings*- or *Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee*-style.

Jared Buckley and Giles Allensby of Slipspace Studios are producing the ambitious *Ages*, a strategy game in which players must balance expansion of a small society against its effects on nature. "Increasing your town's population is fine as long as you don't rush it," says Buckley. Otherwise land will slowly turn grey, trees for harvest will grow more sparsely, crops will be less fruitful and citizens may become ill.

And then there's the breezier *Nut Hunter*, in which a flying squirrel needs to catch as many nuts as it can. "Our interpretation of the theme is as simple as to 'do no harm' to the squirrel," says co-developer **Bart Osmola**.

We'll be announcing winners on June 6, after our judges have done their work.



www.bit.ly/VxbEU1
Keep up with news on the challenge



This year, they include Adrian Chmielarz, co-founder of People Can Fly and The Astronauts; Jo Twist, CEO of UK games trade body UKIE; Karl-Magnus Troedsson, general manager DICE; David Helgason, CEO of Unity; and **Edge** staff.

The winner and two runners-up will each win a Unity Pro licence, including iOS Pro, Android Pro, Flash Pro and the Team License add-ons, which are worth $6,500 in total. The winner will also be awarded a trophy and a trip for one to Unite 13, Unity's annual developer conference, which this year will be held in Vancouver from August 28-30.

Visit www.edge-online.com/tag/gig_challenge to find out more. ■













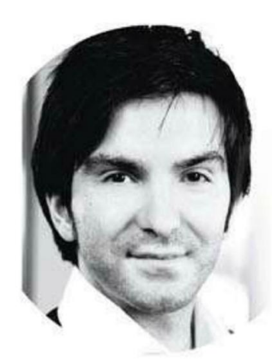







Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"We did have *Crysis 3* running on the Wii U. But there was a lack of business support between Nintendo and EA… ***Crysis 3* on Wii U had to die."**

It's not **Cevat Yerli**'s fault Crytek couldn't bring *Crysis 3* to Wii U.

"EA's shareholders and employees expect better and I am accountable for the miss."



Former EA CEO **John Riccitiello** has resigned. He can be proud of *FIFA* and *Battlefield's* success. Less so *The Old Republic*, *Medal Of Honor* and *Syndicate*.

"I've met virtually no one… who I think is close to as **good a game designer as I am.** I'm not saying that because I think I'm so brilliant. What I'm saying is, I think most game designers really just suck."

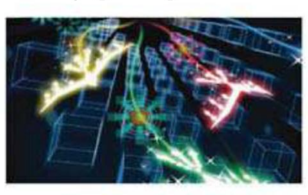
Richard Garriott's comments, taken out of context, infuriated an entire industry.

"Thinking about the future… and then constructing and outputting something appealing is our job as game designers, and from that challenge we can take new strength. And that makes me horny."

Grasshopper Manufacture's **Suda 51** is a little too excited by PlayStation 4.

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Groove Coaster Arcade
Developer Taito

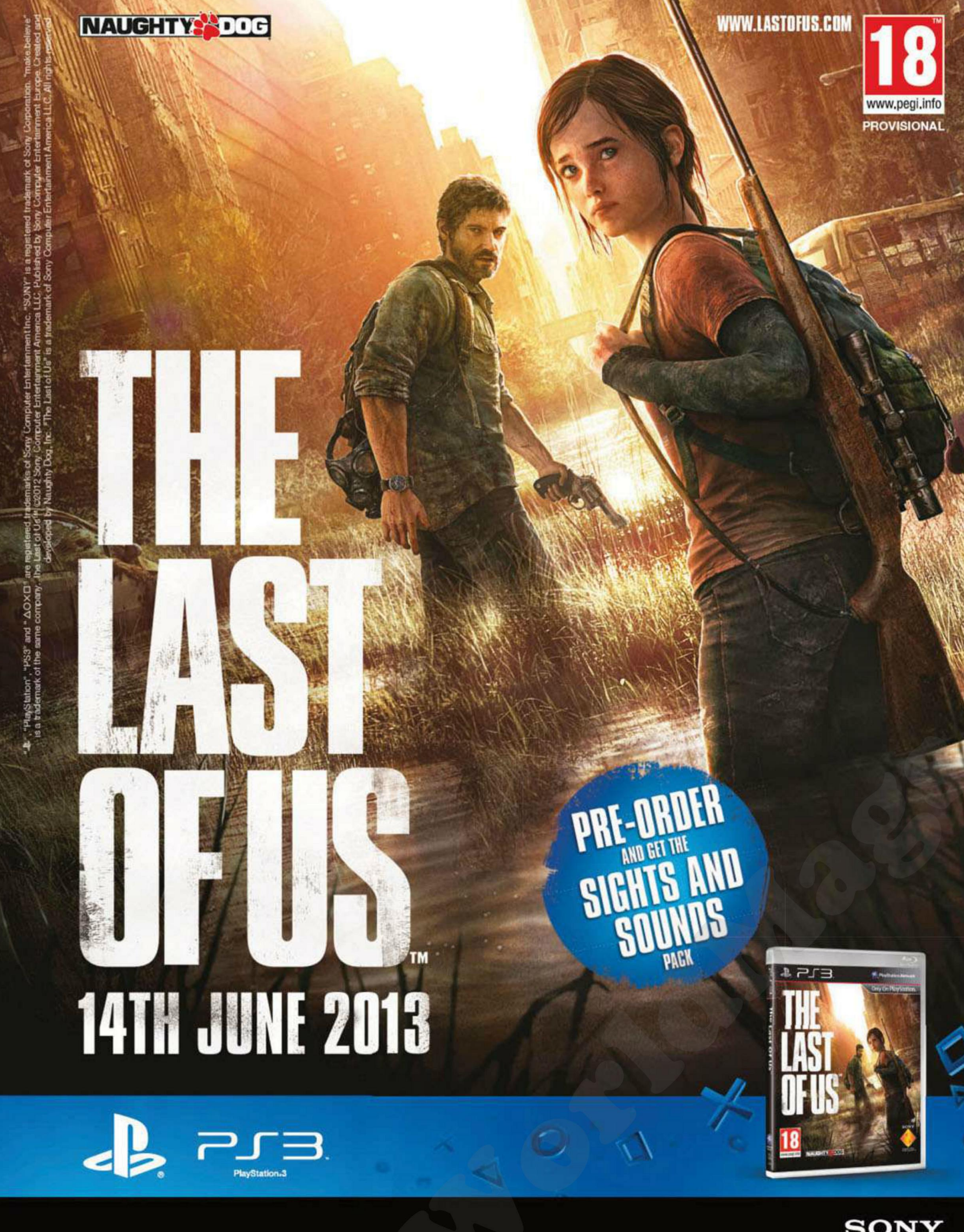
Revealed at Japan's JAEPO expo in February, *Groove Coaster Arcade* joins *Fruit Ninja*, *ReRave* and a world of other mobile games in making the leap to the big – or huge in this case – screen.

Groove Coaster is housed in a towering cabinet with a vertical 55-inch monitor and custom glowing joysticks mounted in a transparent control panel. It's an expensive and over-designed unit but the popularity of *Groove Coaster* on iOS and Android in Japan is more than enough to warrant its size and cost. Visitors to the JAEPO show reported 90-minute waits for a single play and its location test at Taito's Yokohama store one week later practically closed the shop's sixth floor, with queues snaking around the building.

Groove Coaster is about tapping and swiping to the beat while trying to ignore the pyrotechnics obscuring your view of the track lying ahead. Those taps and swipes are button presses and directions on the bulbous joysticks in the arcade port, which features 21 tracks from Japanese TV shows, J-pop stars, DJs and by Taito's house band, Zuntata.

Taito's Facebook and Twitter pages have been promoting *Groove Coaster Arcade* to English-speaking players, almost certainly testing interest in a western release for the machine. It hits Japanese arcades in the winter.




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My favourite game Dara O Briain

The Irish comedian on making games funny, the industry's lucid dreaming phase and finishing Portal over and over just for Still Alive

Videogames may have increased their cultural reach, but building a stand-up routine around their quirks takes a brave comic. **Dara O Briain** took on the challenge and the results were so successful that he was adopted as a spokesperson for the hobby. We spoke to him just before he hosted the 2013 videogame BAFTA Awards.

FUNNY BUSINESS
O Briain is a stand-up comedian and TV presenter who's best known in England for hosting BBC's topical panel quiz Mock The Week, although in Ireland he would more likely be recognised for chairing talk show The Panel. As a stand-up, he's toured prolifically, visiting Paris, Adelaide, Shanghai and Dubai. He has also applied his interest in maths and theoretical physics – which he studied at college – to shows such as Stargazing Live, School Of Hard Sums, and Dara O Briain's Science Club. He has hosted the past five videogame BAFTA Award ceremonies.

Were you worried about adding videogames into your set?
It was a definite, deliberate reckoning of what percentage of the crowd would get it in order to carry the rest of the crowd along. It's bizarre that it's still broadly niche at this stage – you'd presume it wouldn't be. There were nights where I was worried that it wouldn't work, because I get a fairly broad demographic and it can range in ages dramatically… The problem usually [goes] the other way round, though, because that show has a long routine about episiotomies and childbirth, and there will always be some 14-year-olds in the crowd and you just go, "Lads, you've really got to hang with this for a while, because there's a bit at the end that'll pay off for you." [Laughs]

Are your children old enough to play games yet?
Very simple stuff like Toca Boca's games. They're stabbing at the screen and stuff like that – they're little wonders, but they're not quite ready yet. They wander in when I'm playing games and I have to quickly stop shooting people in the head.



Has that changed the games you play?
No, but it does limit the amount of time I have. But because of the BAFTAs, I make a deliberate effort, and I give the loud reasoning in the house that, "No, no, no, this is research for work – I have to know what's going on." I like big games with big worlds like *Skyrim*, but I'll never get more than about 11 per cent through them. There's always one or two games a year that I make the effort with… And in this past year that was the two *Batmans*, and I'll probably get to end of *Far Cry 3*.

Comedy used to be a big part of games, but seems to have dwindled now.
I think you're absolutely right; you could do a lot more. *Portal* did it very well – the writing is the key thing. You probably don't want a comedy game, but there's no reason why you shouldn't bounce [comedy] off it. Currently, we're into the 'dream sequence' phase of the industry, where every game involves a character being invited to take the equivalent of a red pill or a blue pill at some stage, and then the animators go crazy and start warping the environment. I like all of that, a bit like *Dear Esther* and *Journey* and all of those sorts of things – we already have our form, so now we're going to play with it, which is very exciting. But you're right: little amusing, per se, is happening today. If you do something funny, like "the cake is a lie", then people will thank you for it forever – Valve will never quite live down how great that was. Or the song at the end; honestly, that song is probably my favourite moment in all of gaming. I may have gone back one save just to finish the game again.

> "I like big games with big worlds like Skyrim, but I'll never get more than about 11 per cent through them"

It feels like a genuine reward, right?
It properly was a prize. And then it went on YouTube and made me think 'Why the fuck am I playing through this again when I could just watch it?' But that's a great thing, and one that you want to grab people and go, "I know you don't play games, and therefore you're not really going to get this, but hear this…"

So the *Portal* song is your favourite moment. What's your favourite game?
I think it's the first *Half-Life*. The second one was superb, and so was *Portal*, but for me it's the first one. For the animated faces, for the universe it created, for the fact that you can look around on the monorail at the start, the fact the plot was presented through gameplay and the environment… and you'd walk through it and keep looking over your shoulder to make sure you haven't missed something. Also, the bit where soldiers were sent in to kill you – they were great fun to kill – and then you have the Vortigaunts, and G-Man. It was just a level above *Doom* and *Quake* and the FPS games that had preceded it. *Half-Life 2* had the gravity gun, though – I can still do the noise that gun makes, but there's very little market for people impersonating gravity guns.

At the moment.
[Laughs] Yes, some day.



O Briain is the recognisable face of the videogame BAFTA Awards. To find out more about BAFTA's work with the game industry, visit www.bafta.org/games

WEBSITE
Videogame Toilets
www.bit.ly/XmMmJk
What began as a joke very quickly became a riveting catalogue of countless toilets screengrabbed from across the world of games. They include the obvious (*Goldeneye*'s Facility bathroom stalls), the obscure (*DreamWeb*'s overhead view of a sci-fi loo), the weaponised (*Half-Life 2*'s gravity gun-propelled bowls). For each, some artist or other was given the unenviable task of recreating the most mundane of everyday objects in polygons and game logic, and their work has largely been uncelebrated until now. "Imagine being the guy who has to make and texture the toilet, or program it to flush," says the site's creator, before observing: "The *Dead Space* one looks like a torture device." It's a Tumblr, so it might run for a week or for years, but regardless it's worth an extended browse.





VIDEO
LA Noire's Blooper Reel
www.bit.ly/Wm386U
While Team Bondi was capturing face and body animations for *LA Noire*, it also captured every misplaced step and every flubbed line on the motion capture stage. That's material for most games' cutting room floor, but in *LA Noire*'s case it's a fascinating study of the power of MotionScan tech, which recorded every smirk and tongue poke. Long after the game's release, the *LA Noire* blooper reel is a series of eerily credible virtual actors blowing lines, tripping over words and corpsing entirely within the game's engine.

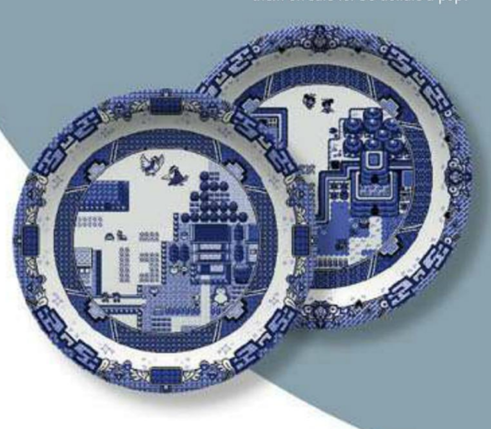
WEB GAME
Roll 20
www.roll20.net
The problems with pencil and paper roleplaying begin with the pencil, the paper and the need for a table to put them on. In a world where friends are international, getting five people to meet in the same city, let alone around the same table, is tricky enough to drive everyone into *World Of Warcraft*. Dedicated players have found ways to game across Skype and Google Docs, but Roll 20's virtual tabletop is a more substantial and coherent attempt, with built-in video chat, dice rolls, custom art and cards, a Soundcloud jukebox, fog of war, and all the tools a game master needs to run a game of D&D. The user interface is intimidating, but anyone dedicated enough to run a campaign won't be daunted. Sure, it's an imperfect solution to a 21st century problem, but it's a solution nonetheless.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

The clutch of articles that arrested our attention during the production of **E**253

GAMES IN PORCELAIN
www.bit.ly/XaHr8p
When artist and illustrator Olly Moss eats lunch, he surely dines off his own custom china, decorated with *Pokémon* and *Zelda* bitmaps in the style of Thomas Minton's Blue Willow pattern. The blue-on-white pattern is Moss' own, layered from sprites and tilesets ripped straight from the original games, printed on transfer and applied to the plates. But sadly they aren't available to buy. For Moss, it was a quick hobby project cobbled together in his downtime between commissions, but how long can it be before an enterprising (and readily copyright-infringing) Etsy seller mimics the designs and puts them on sale for 30 dollars a pop?



continue

Console unblocking
Sony and Nintendo finally make consoles a great place for indies

Paragons of virtue
Only a third of *Mass Effect 3* players went Renegade – proof most gamers are good

Oculus Rift devkits
Support from Valve makes Oculus Rift VR goggles *Team Fortress 2*'s best hat

PAX and love
Noisy, exuberant, and a celebration of games

quit

iOS autorunners
So many licenced platformers. 2013 looks surprisingly like 1993

Sweatshop bust
Apple cracks down on *Sweatshop HD*, proving iOS is no place to make a serious point

Oculus Rift effects
Valve on the *TF2* wiki: "Some very lucky folks never get any effects at all… You are freaks"

SimCity meltdown
'Always online' is such a slippery term, eh EA?



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TWEETS

So sad about the *Dead Space* murder. Who knew that trying to turn the series into a big budget space opera could backfire? (We all did)
Adrian Chmielarz @adrianchm
Game designer, The Astronauts

Lord British has a Kickstarter? The dude lives in a castle and has been to outer space.
Jeff Green @Greenspeak
Social media director, PopCap

Apple says: games "aren't the place for social commentary or criticism." Which is just the reason we need social commentary and criticism.
Ian Bogost @ibogost
Game designer

Gamers, you are the easiest group of people to offend. How do you even go through life being so outraged all the time?
Phil Fish@PHIL_FISH
Creator, Fez



DISPATCHES
MAY

Within Dispatches this issue, Dialogue sees **Edge** readers discuss why games shouldn't be afraid of their lighter side, why consoles' days aren't numbered and the importance of audio design. Not only that, but you discuss how the next-gen could be meaningfully bigger than ever. In Perspective, **Steven Poole** discusses digital paper envy and *The Unfinished Swan*, **Leigh Alexander** highlights what consoles need to stay relevant in a post-Moshi Monsters world, and **Brian Howe** relays Steve Ballmer's unorthodox reaction to PS4's reveal.



www.edge-online.com
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers



Issue 252

Dialogue

Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Letter of the month wins a PS Vita

Descent into darkness

The general trend towards debating the smallest detail of a videogame in light of recent news articles, be they gun crimes or random violence, disturbs me. The last few issues of **Edge** featured articles that called into question the very reason I began my own dark descent into gaming, namely that a game is now seen as an adult art form and any game that does not fit this billing is sidelined as a novelty.

Even the letters pages show some sign of this 'truth' being universal, but I'm taking a stand for the candy-coloured worlds of fun that are still out there, shouting to be heard among the demons, guns and noir palettes that currently dominate the gaming landscape.

There are still those who believe in my cause; the recent resurgence of *Rayman*, Nintendo's staunch stance in providing joy-filled worlds and many mobile developers who are, perhaps, trying to relive their youth proves this. However, how often are these given the label of 'casual' or brushed off as inconsequential?

Yes, gamers have grown up and a lot of those franchises and development teams have grown with them, but shouldn't the basis of gaming be about fun? Are people who get into gaming through the so-called casual markets now expected to 'graduate' to FPSes? Is that the true path to happiness or just an expectation? Should a 30-something (or 40, in my case) gamer be embarrassed when playing the latest *Mario* title? Our hobby should be about the escape from reality and its disillusioned, cynical society. Instead, I fear that it's being drawn into it.
Paul Byron

We perhaps wouldn't agree that games need to be fun, whatever that word really means. But we do propose a new gaming charter: no one should ever feel embarrassed to play *Mario*. Who's with us?

Slated future?

During the days before the launch event of the PS4 announcement, many commentators in the mainstream press were highlighting how the days of the console were numbered and that the days of casual smartphone 69p app gaming were here to stay. While I think the tablet and smartphone signal the end of the dominance of the dedicated handheld console – as noted by Vita's lacklustre sales and 3DS's sales not being as spectacular as hoped – I think the idea of smartphones and tablets killing the console are unfounded.

The last time I checked, games like *Assassin's Creed*, *Call Of Duty* and most major mainstream franchises were still earning in the millions – though not as much as earlier in the current generation of consoles. This generation of consoles has simply gone on for too long and interest in gaming from non-gaming sites has gone down because of this. Wii U hasn't been a leap graphically and the controls are not as compelling to a mainstream consumer as the Wii was. People are also waiting until they see PS4 and the next Xbox in action, and when they decide that they want one I am in no doubt that the game industry will pick up again. The console will have to adapt to a new world where tablets exist but still maintain the blockbuster experience you can only get on a machine like PS4.

Like most of society at the moment, consoles are going through their moment of figuring how fully embrace the digital age. If they don't use some newer social networks and acknowledge that people use media in a different way than the last generation then the dedicated gaming console will become obsolete in the eyes of mainstream gamers. Yes, people still want triple-A blockbuster games but they also want a device that connects with existing networks in people's lives. I'm sure both Sony and Microsoft will do this, and the stories of consoles going the way of the dodo will go the way of the dodo.
Yousef Balboul

That's our hope, too, and surely that of the big publishers, for whom consoles are a huge chunk of their business. But these stories might also make consoles better – questioning aspects such as their closed nature and pricing could encourage the manufacturers to adapt to the times.

Scale up

So the next gen is officially on its way and I, for one, am not expecting a great deal to change in the games I play. But I believe Sony has the right idea: gamers at the centre of everything.

Processing power will make things bigger and 'better' – but not necessarily fresher. *The Witness* and the Media Molecule demo were intriguing, but will be outnumbered by military shooters in the PS4 launch lineup and very few will show anything new. So how can this extra power make a difference? Scale.

Imagine a military FPS set in a city in a state of perpetual war. It's totally open, with objectives popping up on the fly and other gamers operating in the same areas that you can 'share' the game with (call for assistance, trade equipment, shoot at). The possibilities for emergent gameplay are huge; all we need is a big open space and lots of stuff to do.

Being able to pull out from the FPS view to an 'eye in the sky' could then introduce RTS elements that have a profound effect on the gameplay experience at ground level through control of units on a larger scale.

Not new ideas at all, but a framework that would allow each of use to create our own experiences and make each session unique in even the most tired of genres. So for the

next gen all I want is a Sony and pals to build me vast worlds, then let me loose in them.
Mike Goodson

Sounds like some of Bungie's hopes for *Destiny* – and ours, too.

Share and share alike

The Share button feature on the DualShock 4 controller and Dave Perry's pledge for PS4 to "become the social platform for gaming" has got me thinking. Despite the increase of online features and sharing tools in games, this should not be what exclusively defines the 'social' experience. Such tools may actually encourage solitary play and less personal interactions through the medium. In turn, we run the risk of gaming losing its ability to physically bring people together and share a moment in person.

What should the ideal social gaming experience be? There are clear benefits to capturing gameplay and posting it online. It could trigger an informed debate, fuel community interaction on a broad level, and even inspire others to play differently or make a game themselves. But gaming must still include an incentive for people to meet and play together. That a prized moment of gameplay may only become a tweet, seen but soon forgotten before vanishing into the ether, should make us question how social online sharing is.

"But gaming must still include an incentive for people to meet and play together"

The most enjoyable interactions in gaming remain those experienced with another player in the room. They are more tangible, memorable and build relationships. I fondly recall completing *A Link To The Past* over a few weeks in my childhood. I played it with a friend. When I played, my friend advised, commentated and cheered me on through puzzles and battles, and vice versa. It seems significant that we shared the same controller. Link was not only a symbol of our friendship, but a conduit for it. The name 'Link' takes on a new meaning.

There is a unique, indiscernible narrative to a game experience shared in person. It is social gaming at its most visceral. We need to stop attaching such weight to online features. *Journey* is possibly the closest a game has come to making online multiplayer personal. Failing similar projects, home consoles and games should encourage players to get together and prioritise local multiplayer over online features. Perhaps, then, the Wii U has it right. Throw out the gaming chair and replace it with a couch.
Daniel Howie


Who cares that *A Link To The Past* has no multiplayer mode? Daniel Howie knows it can still be shared

Well put. Why not try out some of the local multiplayer options on your prize PS Vita?

Sounds good

The author of Game Sound, Karen Collins, believes there are "many difficulties to overcome" for game audio, with "increasing expectations... [of] consumers and developers" being listed as a future obstacle. With the arrival of next-generation consoles, this opens up huge possibilities for game designers in all areas, especially sound. It allows for the possibility of multiple-speaker configurations, such as 7.1 and 9.1, to become more common, and for a greater variety of audio samples to create hyperrealistic environments and realtime audio mixing within the game environment.

However, unless game developers and publishers begin giving the audio production process the credit it's due, sound design in future games may suffer due to being pushed aside to allow greater focus on visual aesthetics. This may lead to a generation of games that are lacking in quality from a sound design perspective, since they do not match the advanced standard of graphics and gameplay. With this huge opportunity to take immersion within games to the next level and the uncertain future of triple-A gaming, the game industry needs to take every opportunity it can get to keep moving forward and to generate revenue.

With this in mind, I would love to see more articles in **Edge** that look at the sound design process in videogames, because audio is still seen as second-class to the aesthetics of the graphics.
Alex Williamson

Sound design is indeed critical to games – we'll bear your interest in mind.

ONLINE OFFLINE

Your responses to topics on our website at www.edge-online.com

Women and games

We, women, are our worst enemy. You would not believe how much sh*t I get for enjoying gaming from fellow ladies
Nina Yung, Google+

You know +Nina Yung, you're right. I'll be quite honest, I am a closet gamer in my day to day life. None of my fellow preschool/first grade mommies know that if the dishes are done and the kids are fed or in bed...I'm killing orcs.
Christi Aqel, Google+

+Christi Aqel Nice! It's the same within my circle of lady friends. We're all what you would call the "trendy" and fashionista types, so "gaming" is not "accepted" lol
Nina Yung, Google+

That's sad to hear. It's certainly still a problem in many circles, but what about an orc-free game like *Dear Esther* or *Heavy Rain*? Do you think they'd be more acceptable to 'admit' to playing?
Edge

+Edge The word 'game' scares us women.
Nina Yung, Google+

Well I wouldn't go that far, I think almost every lady I know plays *something*, even if it's just a phone app. I think there are too many stereotypes of "gamers" for it to yet be acceptable to many people who do not consider themselves "gamers"... I do, however, think that there has to be at least one other gamer mom in my group, if not more, that I don't know about. But I promise you, I don't want to know... I don't want to run with these women. Gaming is my time, away from mommyhood.
Christi Aqel, Google+



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STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

A trip through the painterly world of The Unfinished Swan leads to ruminations on digital paper envy

Old theories of vision held that the human eye gave out rays that caressed objects to determine what they were. Perception was a case of projecting substance into the world. Likewise in this featureless white tabula rasa, which resolves into a draughtsman's monochrome architecture only when I blindly throw black paint ahead of me.

The central idea of *The Unfinished Swan* is an aesthetic and argumentative inversion of many standard videogame paradigms. In an FPS, the reticle is the focal point of our power to destroy lifeforms and things in the environment, to alter the surroundings to our advantage. The reticle in *The Unfinished Swan* is the aim point for our power to render the environment visible in the first place. Only the fact that, as it turns out, your paint gun must also operate ballistically prevents this from being a virtuously complete recusal from the kinetic assumptions of megaviolence sims.

Even so, this game is still basically a firstperson painter. A subtle risk-reward mechanic operates in parallel to the explicit puzzles: throw too much paint and the environment becomes too splotchy and black; throw insufficient paint and you'll miss architectural details. Throw just enough and you move through a gorgeously evocative sketch, with trees and buildings, as well as pigs, chickens, and unicorns, poking shyly into chiaroscuro reality.

A BAFTA Award for Game Innovation was thoroughly deserved, even if the actual journey through *The Unfinished Swan*'s world doesn't quite sustain the initial wow factor of its premise. It's surely a fine advertisement for videogames if mainstream news stories relay the fact that the BAFTA Awards honoured games about paint-throwing or rug-loving (*Journey*), as well as games about crossbowing islanders (*Far Cry 3*) or masterminding pretend space battles (*XCOM*). (It may still be a puzzle for some pedants that *Journey* could win both the Game Design and Artistic Achievement categories while being passed over for Best Game, which went to the otherwise award-free *Dishonored*, but there are probably persuasive structural reasons for BAFTA to make sure it acknowledges big commercial product as well as the indie arthouse.)

> Throw just enough paint and you move through a gorgeously evocative sketch

As much for its inherent charm, *The Unfinished Swan* is also intriguing for the fact that it continues a cultural trend in which videogames and other products of digital culture evince an envy for the freedom of ink and paper. This is apparent, equally, in *Sumioni: Demon Arts*, a heartbreakingly beautiful game styled in watercolour, where ammo is ink, you summon helpful gods using calligraphy, and draw platforms for yourself directly onscreen. (The influence of PS2 classic *Okami* is here very clear, as it was in *Journey*'s predecessor *Flower*.) In *Sumioni*, you can even switch from ink to water to erase something, such as an enemy projectile. For me, the necessity to switch thumbs from buttons or stick to screen and back again so rapidly and frequently tends to turn *Sumioni*'s battles into an appalling illustrative shambles, but I still can't help loving the mess I'm making.

What might it mean in general that we are happy to see the hi-tech horsepower of PS3 or Vita exploited in the service of creating virtual worlds that resemble hand-drawn or hand-brushed pictures on paper or canvas? Among the most popular and lauded iPad apps, similarly, are those such as Paper and Brushes, which provide an ersatz simulation of drawing and painting, though necessarily with none of the delightful friction and pressure and tiny risk (of inky fingers) of the real thing.

This is not really nostalgia, because paper – despite the gung-ho predictions of 1990s cybertheorists – never went away. (As Ian Sansom's wonderful book Paper: An Elegy makes clear, the modern world is still pretty much inconceivable without paper.) Many people still prefer to buy paper books instead of electronic files, and the argument for paper as a medium of creation is even stronger than that for it as one of consumption. Paper plus ink, pencil or paint is an analogue interface of a richness, depth and complexity far superior to any yet conceived for an electronic device. As I write, plans are even afoot for the Italian 'luxury' notebook-maker Moleskine – whose products are as popular with geeks as neo-Luddites – to be floated on the Milan stock exchange.

So perhaps games such as *The Unfinished Swan* and *Sumioni*, as well as apps such as Paper and Brushes, are not so much yearning for a past (and present) of physical art-making as proselytising for a future where the virtues of paper and the dynamic revisability of the digital can finally achieve a creative 'convergence' worthy of the name. What is currently called e-paper – that grey-on-grey plastic slate of a Kindle, nearly as good as reading a book in a foggy twilight on a particularly gloomy moon of Saturn – is actually nothing like paper, since you can't scribble on it. But perhaps one day your Moleskine notebook will be a handheld videogame system as well as a place to scrawl down your latest high-concept sci-fi zombie screenplay idea while ostentatiously frowning in Starbucks. If so, I can't wait.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



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LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

Forget the console wars, the real battle is to stay relevant in the face of a fast-changing landscape

When I was a child, we waited every month for glossy magazines to arrive in the mail, fat with cartoonish images of posturing characters and the kind of adverts designed to appeal to kids who longed for radical skateboards and neon sunglasses. These were our only windows into the world of games. We brought them to school, raw and dog-eared as touchstones often are, and scribbled pen circles around the things we longed for based only on tiny blurbs.

Back then, console wars were mostly about ideals and sentiment, and to a lesser extent, our half-informed babble about the tech specs we barely understood. Our young hands and eyes were prizes in a noisy competition for attention and admiration, mascots in shades looming large in our imaginary arenas. You chose a hero, an aesthetic, and then you had a hardware platform to which you could swear ultimate fealty.

It's a different world today. My kid cousin watches YouTube on her iPhone, looking for videos where cool teen boys share *Minecraft* tips. Kids just a little younger than she is have never played with a traditional controller.

The business factors that complicate this impending console generation in ways never before seen have been fairly well trodden: our attention is fragmented across multiple devices, we're used to accessing interactive entertainment cheaply and more quickly, and cloud technology will bring the PC into the living room, meaning the all-importance of designated hardware is harder to assure.

But the cultural shift is also interesting. Who is the audience for a game console today? Certainly, I want one, but this is my career – to what extent are other single 31-year-old women like me? And even I want one, where previously I might have wanted two.

Not long ago, I stopped into a major toy store here in New York City and was surprised by how thoroughly gaming has colonised the way children play. Yes, licences are everywhere: *Angry Birds* and *Cut The Rope* stuffed animals, *Minecraft* action figures, *Sonic* race tracks, and *Halo* and *Gears* playsets. Those latter two are particularly interesting – kids' toy soldiers based on M-rated 'core' brands? Is the core gamer, then, a child dabbling in adult stuff, or adults not in a hurry to stop playing with toys?

> Online spaces will have to feel modern and social, not like zones for mudslinging

It's not just the obvious crossover of gaming brands into the world of children's play. Even traditional dolls now have interactive components and virtual currency attached. There is *CityVille* Monopoly, a board game about currency, which comes with points you can exchange for virtual currency in the Facebook game. More small toys than I've ever seen are sold in 'blind' packs, systematising a collection element.

This bustling merchandising feels like a direct result of the touchscreen explosion, and the fact audiences increasingly get their fix of interactive entertainment across many smaller arenas. In the same toy store, videogames are sold on a literal lower level, where the crowds thin and grandparents ask sales staff whether they ought to buy a Wii U for their grandchild. Traditional game console software starts to feel like a dimmer and less radiant cousin, a clumsy relic next to what seems to be grabbing market share and attention now.

We always wanted a broader gaming audience. When the Wii sold to unprecedented new players, there was, for a while, the hope that eventually they'd 'trade up' from simple family games into the core market. But it doesn't seem to have happened that way – the core market seems narrower, and so does the range of products it produces. Even many adults who've been traditional gamers for most of their lives seem to be getting bored.

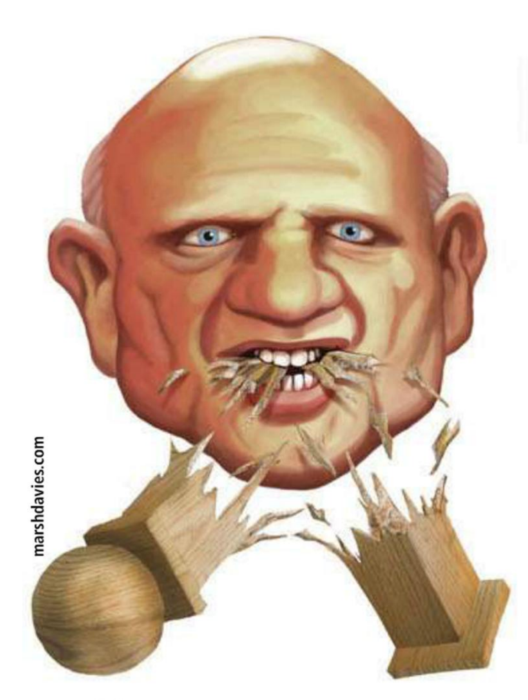
To some extent, there is a core market that will always buy game hardware and big-name franchises. But numbers suggest it's not enough to be viable, given the cost of creating in that arena. Yet if I had to take a guess, it's adults who grew up as traditional gamers, and who now have their own families and purse-strings, who will determine the degree to which modern consoles are still relevant.

There is a grown-up core market that remains unaddressed: we buy the argument that there's some degree of depth, complexity and immersion only attainable on consoles, yet we're too old for the commercialised teen fantasies and fan-pandering that dominates the current market.

To thrive, consoles will need not only to keep up with the changing landscape, but to lead it. They'll need games that push more than just technology boundaries, but that feel genuinely mature and relevant, that adults want to talk about at work, or play at social gatherings. Online spaces will have to feel modern and social, not like zones for playground mudslinging.

It's developers, not console manufacturers, who will have to prove there's a relevant role for game consoles in the landscape – and that it's a mainstream role, since it's not clear how much longer the economics of the industry are sustainable by continuing to focus on a dated idea of the 'core'. The business of games has changed immensely since the console wars we remember, but it's important we account for how much the culture has changed, too.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media



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BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

After being caught off guard by the PS4 reveal, Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer unveils Xbox 720

The date is February 20, 2013, it's 3am and Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer is sleeping furiously, rhythmically squeezing a stress ball in each hand. The nocturnal quiet is rudely broken by the ringing of a Windows Phone 8 handset on the nightstand. Bolting awake with a howl, Ballmer paws at the chirping device, trying to accept the call. But instead his 360 boots up with a mighty roar, all the overhead lights blaze on, and down in the garage, his car doors pop open. "Stupid SmartGlass!" he growls, staring at the phone with unnerving intensity, shoulders heaving. It rings again, but this time he manages to answer it.

"Hello!" he shouts cheerfully over the hurricane-force winds required to cool the advanced alien technology in the console. "Lunch? Why is a subordinate calling me about lunch in the middle of the night?" Sweat springs forth on his brow and soaks the front of his nightshirt, possibly because he's now doing one-armed press-ups. "Or are you saying launch? Hold on." He somersaults to the entertainment centre and powers down his 360. The room grows quiet again, but he continues to shout. "Now," he says fiercely. There is a long, strange pause. The subordinate waits patiently. Finally, Ballmer continues, "What's this about? Uh-huh. And why do we need to speed up the launch?"

As the subordinate on the other end of the line speaks, Ballmer casually gnaws off a good-sized chunk of the wooden bedpost and serenely chews it to a pulp. A spasm of fury creases his face as the crucial bit strikes home. "Those bastards are revealing?" he yells, spitting splinters. "Tonight?" Ballmer does what he thinks of as his judo spin kick, rips down a strip of wallpaper and ties it around his head like Rambo. "I've got work to do!" He jogs down the hall, clapping his hands and pumping his fists, and fires out of his front door. An anxious voice – "Sir? Sir? Oh God, get me the board!" – can be heard coming from Ballmer's now-discarded phone.

> Stalking to and fro like a panther, he shiftily eyes the spectators as if sizing up their characters

It's 7pm on February 23, 2013, and Microsoft is rather abruptly revealing Xbox 720 to the world. The event is being held in the gymnasium of a public school in Steve Ballmer's district, because no major venues had been available on such short notice. A bed sheet hanging over the door says "Xbox 720 reveal, 7:00" in black marker and "Pep Rally, 7:15" in puffy paint. Agreeing to share the space with the pep rally had been the only way to secure it. In the hot gymnasium, the bleachers fill up with families, students and the few local press who had caught wind of Ballmer's hand-leafleting campaign. Baton twirlers, a lone tuba player, cheerleaders and a colour guard warm up in the wings.

Ballmer stomps to a podium, startling the chattering audience into silence, and begins the presentation with one of his charged silences. Stalking to and fro like a panther, he shiftily eyes the wary spectators as if sizing up something essential in their characters. He leaps onto the front bleacher, stage-whispers "I love", and then screams "this gymnasium!" at shocking volume. A school librarian gasps and spills a box of popcorn; someone's little brother starts weeping in terror. After kissing the librarian and karate chopping a lacrosse coach in the neck, Ballmer backflips off the bleachers and lands at the podium. Suddenly composed, he briskly explains that unlike his competitors, he's actually going to show us Xbox 720. He whisks a sheet off a folding Formica table with a wild cry of passion.

As far as the eye can tell, this 720 is two 360s Ballmer roped together with Christmas lights. Various seashells and a little macaroni art are glued all over the casings. The CEO is visibly moved as he gazes on it. Tears stream down his cheeks. He tremulously lists some of the advances in the system: it has twice the processing power, an artisanal new look, several different colours of rings of death, out-of-box backwards compatibility, and a new controller with an LED light bar, which looks a lot like a glow stick taped, inexplicably, to a Dreamcast controller. He doesn't blink when an errant baton whizzes past his eyes, though it causes him not to notice Microsoft's board of directors shuffling in. He switches the 720 on.

Ballmer shows a gameplay demo of what he claims to be a new *Halo* featuring a female protagonist, though it appears to be *Halo 4* with cleavage drawn on the bottom of the monitor. He's already getting drowned out by the marching band and the din of the system itself when the football team comes crashing through a banner, trampling the prototype, table and all. The *Halo* footage keeps right on streaming. The bleachers are in mayhem. "The twin cooling fans and disc engines are loud enough to kill household pests!" is the last thing the CEO can be heard to say in the hubbub. "Ballmer's gone rogue," one of the board members barks into a mouthpiece. Another frantically waves his arms and yells, "Shut it down!" Two space marines with butterfly nets creep up behind Ballmer and catch him. A third activates the Xbox's secret built-in consumer mind-wipe function, expunging this incredible snafu from viral memory – until now.

Brian Howe writes about books, games and more for a variety of publications, including Pitchfork and Kill Screen

#253



THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Pinning a shadow

Looking Glass Studios has almost passed into legend. In reality, this Massachusetts-based studio didn't create that many games to shape it, but the likes of *System Shock* and *Thief: The Dark Project* nevertheless came to symbolise a whole philosophy of open-ended and immersive game design. It also forged the reputations of its staff – Doug Church, Ken Levine, Harvey Smith, Warren Spector, Jonathan Chey and more – many of whom carried Looking Glass' torch in subsequent studios until the market for such games seemingly disappeared in the 2000s.

But they've recently experienced a resurgence. Only a few months ago, Arkane released *Dishonored*, which was co-directed by Smith, and bears more than a few close resemblances to Eidos Montreal's *Thief* (p42). There's Irrational's *BioShock* series, helmed by Levine, of which we now have a whole new entry to play. Why are these games coming back now? Actually, it was probably *BioShock*'s success that revealed that there is a place – a proudly prominent one – for smart, richly drawn firstperson games with deep systems and imaginative narratives that are interwoven with play. They're difficult and expensive to make, but they're celebrated like few other games.

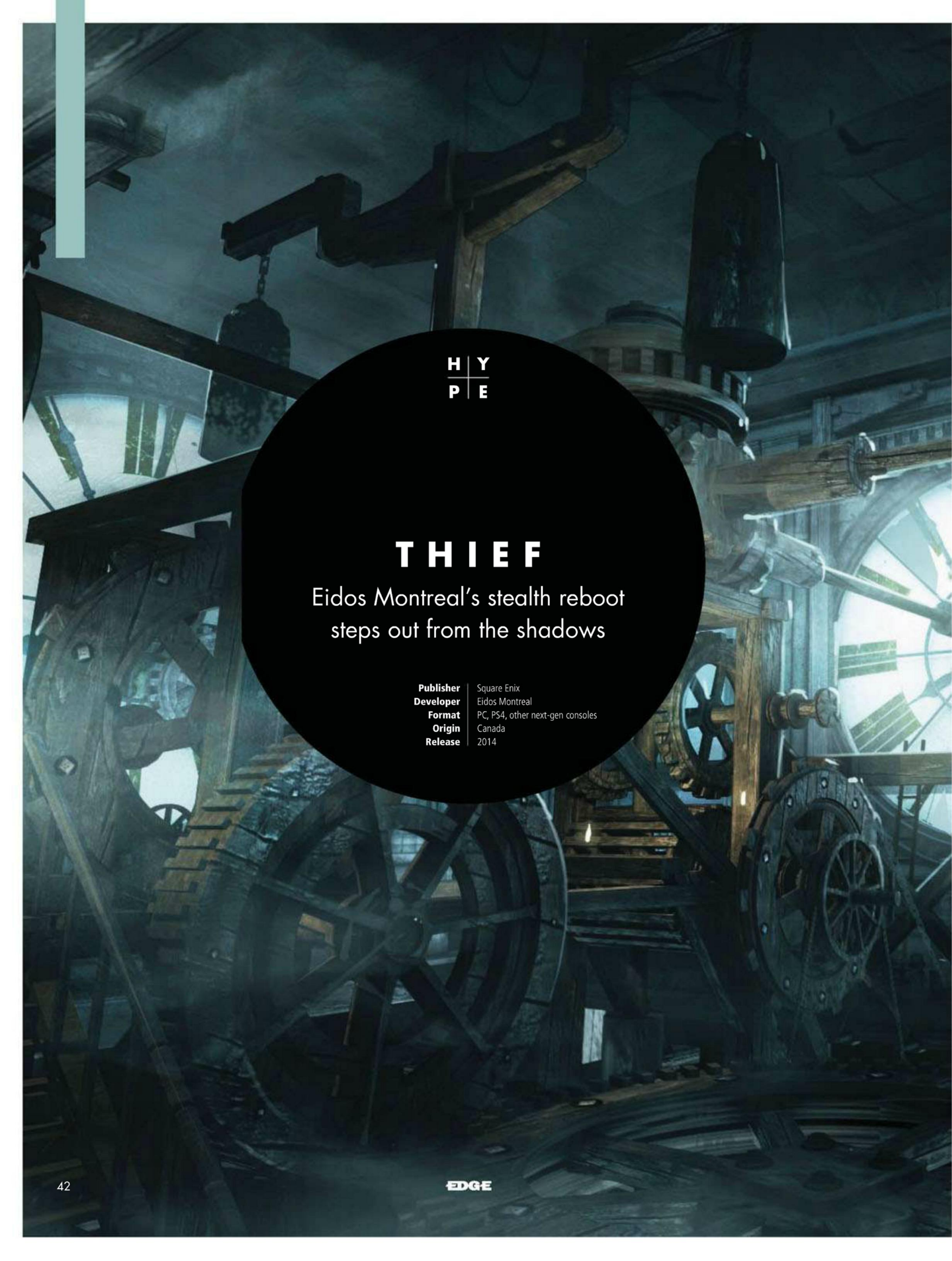
It's curious that a single studio has sprung up from nothing to become the all-but-official carrier of a chunk of Looking Glass' legacy. Eidos Montreal's first game was 2011's *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, which updated Warren Spector and Harvey Smith's classic. And its second is *Thief*, which is aiming to perform the same feat of applying respectful continuity while introducing modern design conceits. Maintaining broad appeal while attending to both rose-tinted memory and the genuine qualities of these games is a delicate job, one that *Human Revolution* achieved with considerable grace. Will *Thief*, too? Garrett might have gained upgrades and acrobatics since his last game, but his main trade still seems in rude health.

MOST WANTED

Space Hulk iOS, Mac, PC
Full Control's recreation of Space Hulk is decidedly less limited than the sold-out 2009 edition of Games Workshop's classic boardgame, but remains largely faithful to the rules, which are still a stout foundation for turn-based strategy.

Battlefield 4 360, PC, PS3, PS4
The PC footage of *Battlefield 3* had little visually in common with the versions console players still managed to enjoy, but *Battlefield 4* should appear on shelves just in time to take advantage of consoles more than capable of throwing around 64 players at ultra settings.

Elite: Dangerous PC
Elite has a special significance for gamers, even if *Eve Online* has since offered an expansive galaxy to explore. In *Dangerous*'s case, though, it's not just any galaxy – it's our galaxy, populated with planets, stars and, hopefully, an abundance of adventure to match.



H | Y
P | E

THIEF

Eidos Montreal's stealth reboot steps out from the shadows

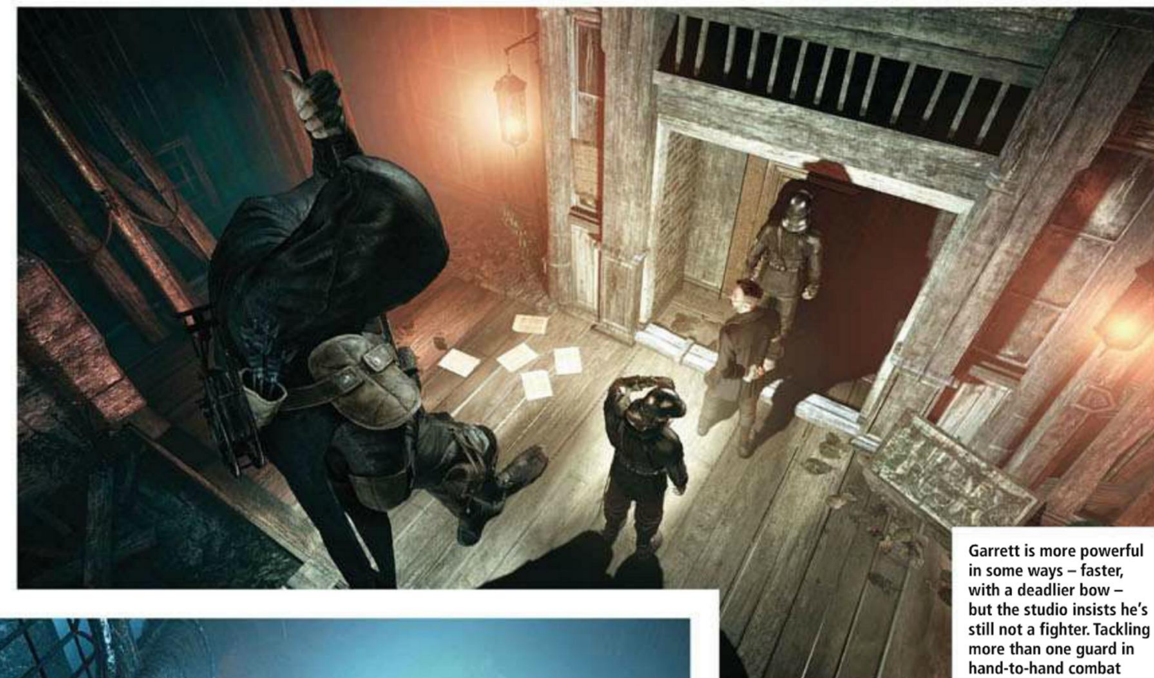
Publisher	Square Enix
Developer	Eidos Montreal
Format	PC, PS4, other next-gen consoles
Origin	Canada
Release	2014



Returning master thief Garrett stands proud in the midst of the clocktower's mechanism. It's a grand example of the new game's setting, a clash of industrial, Victorian and Medieval ideas



THIEF



BELOW **Garrett has always possessed superior dexterity and balance, but now he also has a *Dishonored*-esque swoop ability and the claw to help him get around**

Garrett is more powerful in some ways – faster, with a deadlier bow – but the studio insists he's still not a fighter. Tackling more than one guard in hand-to-hand combat is likely to end badly





The first words spoken by shadow-hugging anti-hero Garrett in almost a decade are carefully chosen: "I've been away, but I couldn't tell you where." In that wry, noirish tone of old, they acknowledge his absence and also address the conundrum of bringing him back – the balancing act of continuity and reinvention at which Eidos Montreal proved itself more than adept with 2011's *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*.

In some ways, this is a fresh beginning. The '4' is gone from the title – a blessing, since at last look it appeared in the middle of it – and the game is aimed at PC and the next gen, confirmed for PS4 and "other next-gen consoles" (read: the new Xbox). These decisions are linked: *Thief* is now a new game for new machines. But it's also still unmistakably *Thief*, a firstperson stealth adventure set in a world built around shadows, light and stealthily cracking people unconscious with a sturdy blackjack.

Certain building blocks have been identified as crucial to the *Thief* experience. Garrett is one of them. The 30-minute gameplay demo Eidos Montreal has readied for the press shows a scarred, angular hero strapped in buckled leather layers up to his high, peaked hood. The obvious concern is the jollification of this dark hero to appeal to broad console audiences, but if anything the new Garrett threatens to be too snarled, too icy. He delivers his signature line during a monologue – "What's yours can be mine" – and it seems a shade more purposeful and directed than the appealing bow for hire of the original games. The team, though, see him as essentially unchanged. "The Garrett I know is back," says producer **Stephane Roy**.

Faithfully preserved alongside the man are his methods. *Thief* is still a game founded on – and enveloped warmly within – darkness. What's currently an uncluttered UI still includes a light meter, now a small circle in the lower-left corner, which moves from jet to washed-out black as Garrett slides out of the shadows and into the light. While many of the changes to the old *Thief* formula are motivated by plausibility, the shadows remain as impenetrable as ever, even at close range. The corners of the decadent Victorian burlesque house Garrett slips through are cosy safe spots, and at one point he even uses the looming shadow thrown by a moving guard to steal through a doorway unseen. Probable? No, but it's a conceit central to the rules that make up *Thief*'s world.

Equally central are the tools of Garrett's trade. These have been updated, but

BELOW The claw is designed to speed up exploration of the City. Its use is restricted to specific sections, as marked by a particular surface type, rather than open-ended grappling

Dishonorable mention

The design lineage of last year's *Dishonored* (co-creatively directed by Ion Storm veteran Harvey Smith) established a familial link with the new *Thief*. Seeing Eidos Montreal's game running rams home the resemblance – the decadent Imperial aesthetic, the firstperson sneaking. Even Garrett's new swoop from cover to cover solves a design problem in a similar fashion to Corvo's Blink ability. Not that Eidos seems worried. The team is full of praise for Arkane's game, and understandably so: it showed there's still an appetite for serious, open-ended stealth, and *Thief* will be appearing on a different set of consoles.



LEFT *Thief* has always carried a sense of physicality, with each type of surface making a different noise. Now Garrett's hands will appear in the firstperson view and brush over objects, adding to the sense of feeling your way through the world

respectfully so. The blackjack, deliverer of a thousand muffled blows, returns as our hero's standard armament, although word that it can be upgraded in this game is rather perplexing. Its virtue, after all, is its simplicity.

And then there are the arrows, which aren't weapons so much as instruments of precision. In the past, they plugged into the *Thief* games' systems of light and sound, and were an elegant way for Garrett to interact with his surroundings. They're back and just as full of tricks as ever. We see a dry ice-tipped arrow extinguishing a brazier so that Garrett can sneak past a guard, an update of the original torch-snuffing water arrows. But the bow is also more powerful, more overtly lethal, and used more frequently for headshot kills during the Eidos demonstration than for altering the environment.

This is the pattern for everything in the new *Thief*: the same, but a little different. This particular approach has become the speciality of Eidos Montreal, which was founded in 2007 with the mandate of bringing back the twin *Deus Ex* and *Thief* series – both highly influential firstperson hybrids, both forged in the creative fires of Looking Glass/Ion Storm.

This has led to the development of a particular approach: a respectful remastering that's creating something between sequels and reboots. The deft resurrection of *Deus Ex* leaves the studio in credit when it comes to noteworthy additions or corrections to the *Thief* formula, but these alterations also merit the most scrutiny.

This is the pattern for everything in the new Thief: the same, but a little different

The biggest of them all is Focus, a mode entered for short bursts that highlights key objects in Garrett's surroundings and which helps to streamline combat and puzzles. It is, in other words, a temporary power-up to help players over difficulty spikes. In the gameplay demo, activating Focus shortens close



www.bit.ly/YzLwqo
Gallery of more art and screenshots



BELOW **An example of how the history of the series is 'layered' in the new game, The House Of Blossom, the louche bordello in which the demo is set, is a redesigned version of the Keeper library in *Thief: Deadly Shadows***



combat to quick time despatches, slowing time to allow Garrett to identify vulnerable points on his attacker before erupting into a flurry of critical blows.

Focus also fast tracks a lock-picking puzzle that's in danger of interruption, and even alerts Garrett to the precariousness of an overhanging chandelier when an alarm has been triggered, which our hero uses to crush a pair of onrushing guards. In short, Focus adds a dash of the spectacular to *Thief*'s patient lurking. Its supply is strictly limited, forcing you to use it strategically, but the idea of it will have the purest of purists twitching.

When the dashing about is done… the demo has a very familiar Thief feel to it

It's not the only lurch that *Thief* makes towards action gaming, though. The camera slips into thirdperson perspective for the kind of ledge clambering seen in the *Assassin's Creed* series (during which Garrett uses a new piece of grappling equipment called the claw) and also during cinematic combat takedowns. Drawing in further influences, there's also a burst of freerunning through the city inspired by *Mirror's Edge*. The view's still locked in firstperson, but Garrett's dashing down alleyways and sliding over surfaces while frantic music plays in the background.

The aim is to make Garrett agile as well as invisible and, rather more functionally, to cut down the time potentially impatient players spend negotiating the rooftops and plague-ridden streets of the City, which isn't entirely open to exploration, but does feature an explorable hub. Comfortingly, though, when the dashing about is done, the mission seen in the demo has a very familiar *Thief* feel to it, with tense infiltration, delicate probing leading to item acquisition, and an escape that starts out carefully before throwing both hands in the air, sprinting into the open and jumping over a wall.

Of course, this isn't the only way to play – there's still a strong emphasis on choice and open approaches to mission goals. But the creeping, the off-hand swiping of everything that isn't nailed down (into implausibly large trousers) and the eavesdropping on the unguarded comments of guards and civilians project an attitude that matches the original. And that is the key to Eidos Montreal's approach: it's not replicating the gameplay specifics of a game too dated to emulate, but recapturing its spirit. On this showing, it seems unlikely that *Thief* will manage to surprise us, but there's every chance it'll be entertaining all the same. ■

Q&A
Stephane Roy
Producer, Eidos Montreal



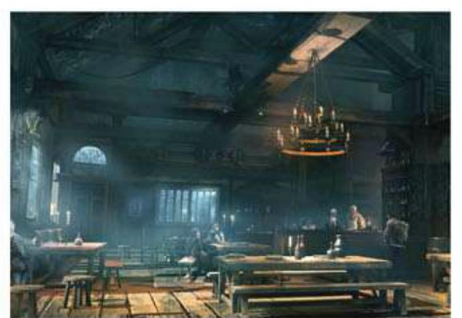
Your Garrett seems to have more of an edge and a hardness to him. Was that deliberate decision?
I think it's a question of perception. On my side, I really think the Garrett you like is back. We worked very hard to respect his personality – dark humour, cynical, talking to himself. Maybe you have this feeling because of the visual aspect. Keep in mind that at that time the look of the character was dictated by the limitations of the technology. Today, we can give him exactly the look we have in mind.

Was there much crossover between the *Deus Ex* and *Thief* teams?
Not a lot; honestly, they're different teams. But you're right, when you think about what they did. The pressure was very high on their side to prove, 'Yes, we can reinvent a *Deus Ex* game.' It's exactly the same story on our side now. They had a lot of success, it's really a good game, so thanks to them, because it's very useful for us – people are willing to give us a chance, since it's Eidos Montreal that worked on *Deus Ex*, and the studio proved that we can do it.

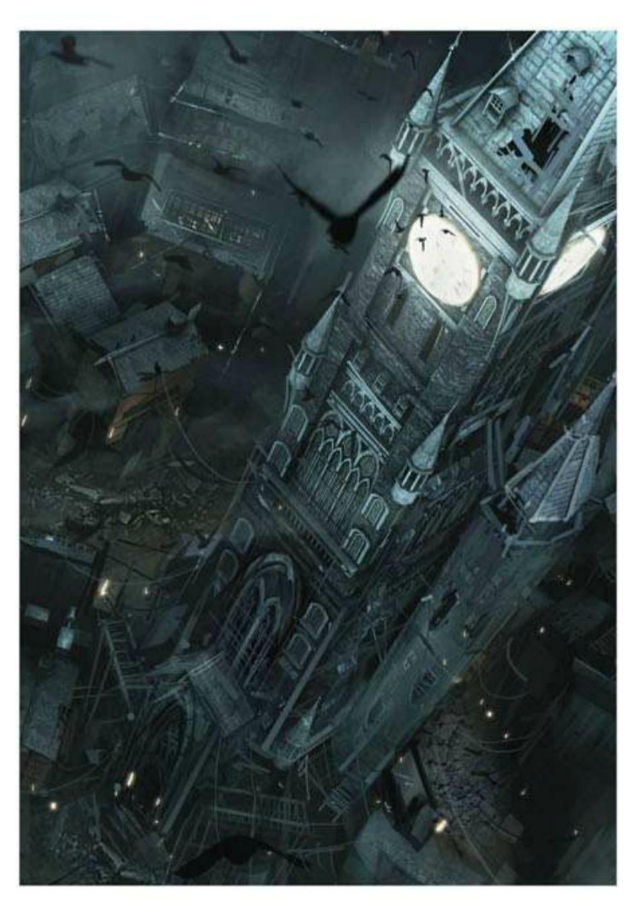
Eidos Montreal has taken two IPs from Looking Glass/Ion Storm, a creative group with a well-articulated development philosophy. Is this something you're conscious of? Do you discuss it internally?
I would tell you that we approached this project with a lot of respect, because you're right, the development team before us did an amazing job. If people come back and try our game, it's because of that. One thing that is crystal clear in our minds is that we don't want to copy. It's going to be our own flavour – respecting the past, but now we have to adapt it with today's expectations.

When was the decision taken to make *Thief* a next-gen game?
At the beginning, the goal was just to understand our game. Why people are still in love with this franchise? And what kind of experience do we want to make? Once we were sure we knew how to make a very good *Thief* game, then we decided what platform we should be on. And we said we should aim immediately for next generation – part of the future. For this type of game, though, it's really not about, 'Yay, we have more polygons,' or, 'Excellent, we have more pixels,' or things along those lines. It's more about the immersion, the gameplay experience, [and] about the main character, Garrett. That's not a question of whether the machine's powerful or not.





ABOVE + LEFT **The world of *Thief* is built on contrasts – light and shadow, interior and exterior, seen and unseen. And, as we see in these two locations, warm, glowing golden-orange and cold foggy blues.** RIGHT **The clocktower is another returning element from past games, having played a vital role in *Deadly Shadows*. This time around, it looks to be a dominating part of the City's dark and forboding skyline**



LEFT **Garrett remains an unusual hero – dark, lean and pale, with a detailed leather outfit. As well as the traditional notions of thieves and outlaws, Brandon Lee's The Crow and Heath Ledger's Joker are being cited as charismatic influences.** BELOW **The tools of Garrett's trade. The functional arrow types have been updated and partially redesigned, though a scan from left to right suggests fire, torch-snuffer, broad head and noise-maker variations**

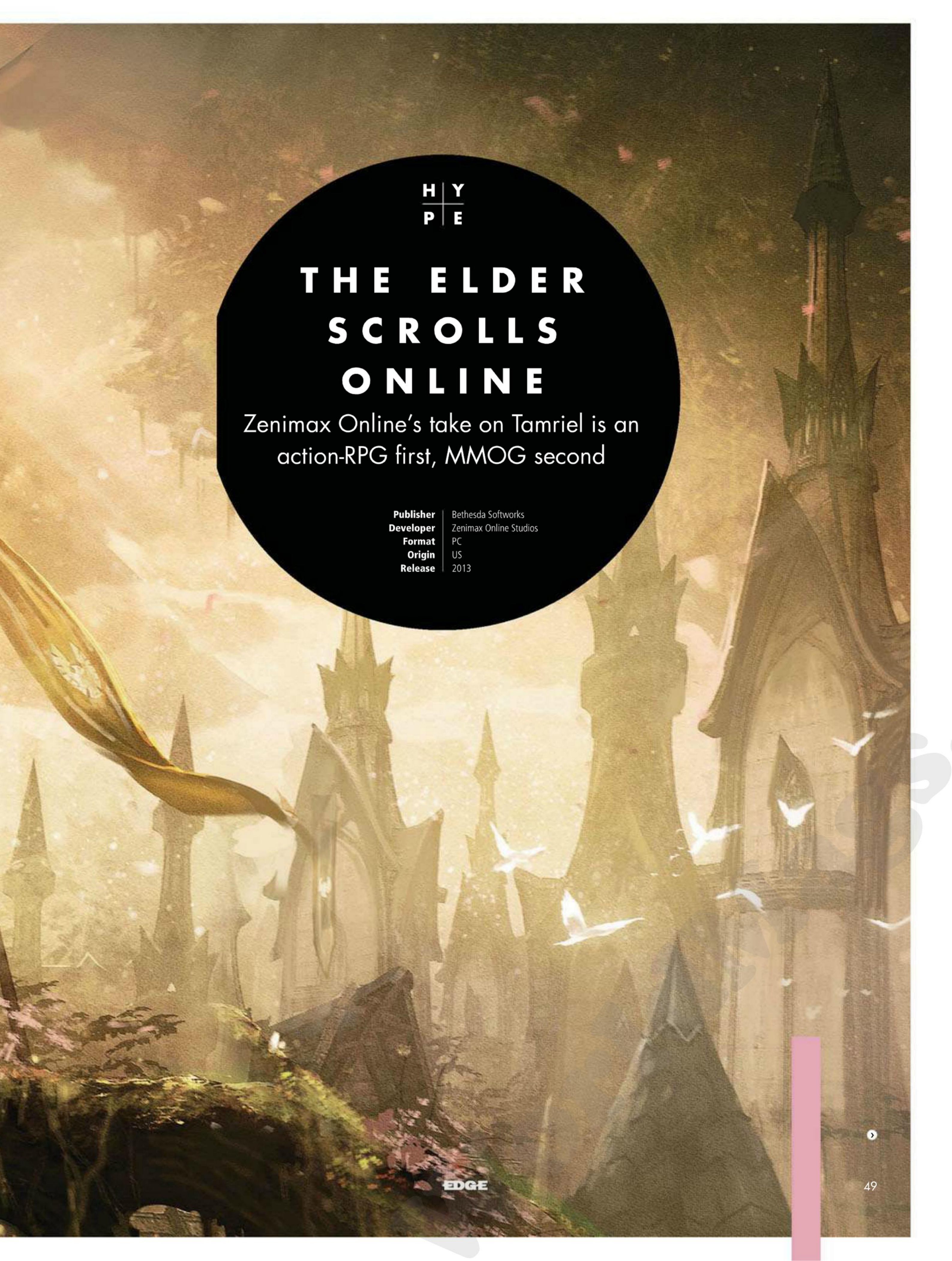
Design showcase

Eidos Montreal is fusing Medieval and Victorian styles as it rebuilds the City for a new audience and new machines

BELOW **The Baron's guards. While wealthy citizens are seen in top hats, the guards represent an iron-clad Medieval strand of design**



The Elder Scrolls Online divides Tamriel into three factions: the Daggerfall Covenant, Ebonheart Pact and Aldmeri Dominion. The game's entire world can be explored by a single character, however



THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE

Zenimax Online's take on Tamriel is an action-RPG first, MMOG second

Publisher	Bethesda Softworks
Developer	Zenimax Online Studios
Format	PC
Origin	US
Release	2013



THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE

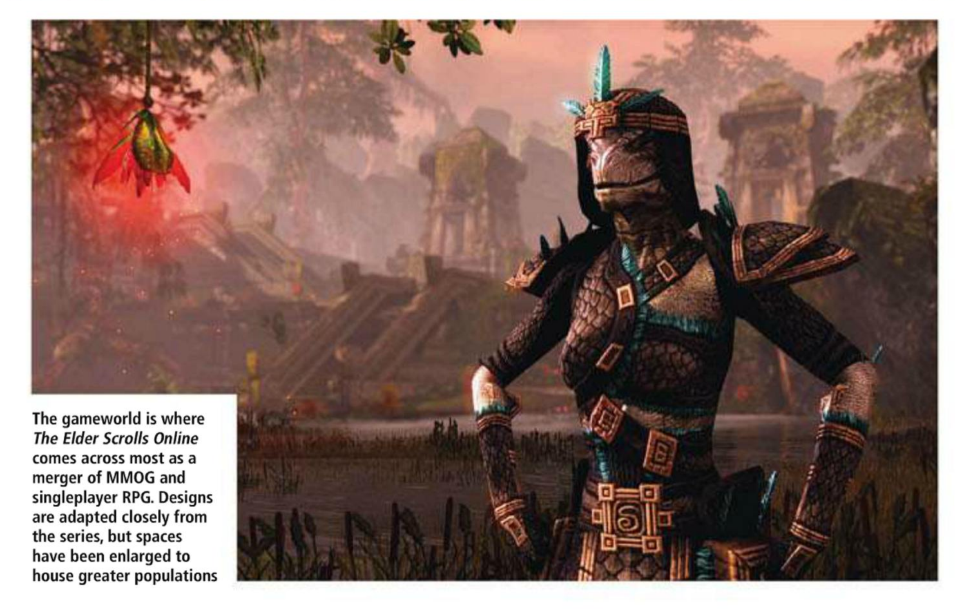


RIGHT **Enemies have dynamic AI: humanoids of different types will assist one another with heals and combo attacks, while spiders can consume the fallen to grow stronger**

Zenimax bills *The Elder Scrolls Online* as a seamless merger of a sandbox singleplayer RPG and the best aspects of an MMOG. The game's detractors have written it off as *World Of Warcraft* with a Tamrielic paint job. As you'd expect, the reality is more complicated than either take.

Structurally, *The Elder Scrolls Online* is an MMOG. Content is divvied up along well-understood lines: a main storyline for solo players, group content, dungeons, crafting, and large-scale player vs player combat. Despite top-level conservatism, however, a knife has been taken to the genre – not simply to better fit the *Elder Scrolls* mould, but to rethink long-standing orthodoxies.

The only persistent user interface elements are a crosshair, a minimap and a small quest tracker; your hotbar, health, stamina and magicka meters and other elements appear only when needed. When you level up, points can be invested in skill lines based on your class, your equipment, your race, your guild affiliations and multiple other elements, including whether or not you're a vampire or werewolf. Active skills are levelled through use and can be transformed into one of two variants when a certain level is reached. A full firstperson mode – hands and all – is currently being implemented, allowing players to play in the traditional *Elder Scrolls* perspective if they so wish.



The gameworld is where *The Elder Scrolls Online* comes across most as a merger of MMOG and singleplayer RPG. Designs are adapted closely from the series, but spaces have been enlarged to house greater populations

Combat likewise adapts familiar themes. Blocking and striking are bound to the mouse, with power attacks achieved by holding the attack button and a spell-interrupting bash performed by holding block while attacking. Blocking an incoming power attack stuns your opponent and leaves them open to a counter, but the same applies to you. These are the foundations of a reactive combat system that your hotkeyed skills then complicate.

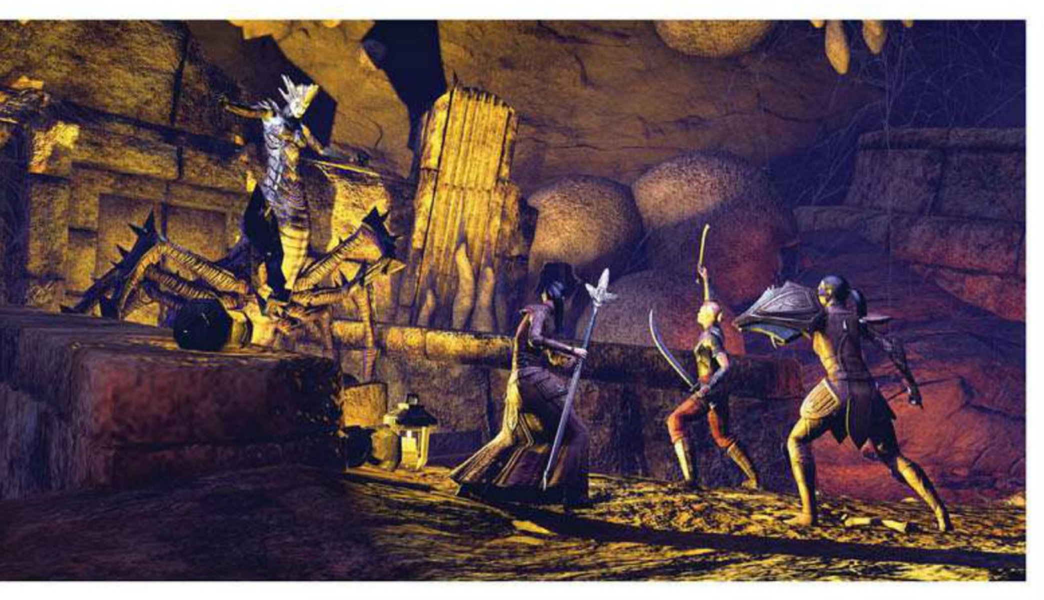
Up to six spells, an ultimate ability and a consumable item can be bound at any given time, and these are cast instantly and without cooldown. The system is more *Skyrim* than *World Of Warcraft* – rather than establishing a rotation of skills, combat is about tactically spending your health, stamina and magicka in response to changing circumstances.

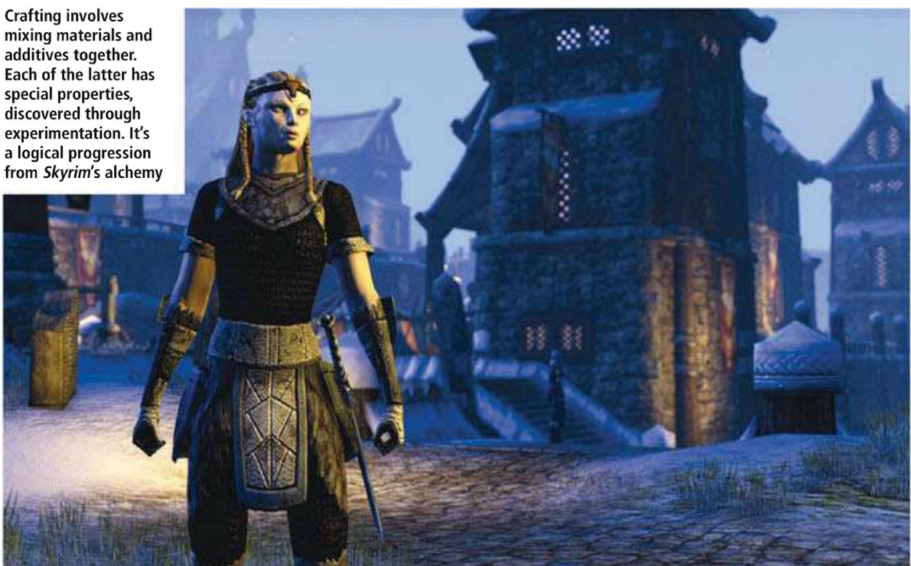
No damage numbers tick above enemy heads, and on-hit effects are subtle by MMOG standards. If anything, this is the combat system's biggest failing: while the ambition to replace overly technical feedback with something more immersive is laudable, the animation isn't currently impactful enough to sell the power of blows.



Plot anchors

As is common for *Elder Scrolls* games, your character's life begins with imprisonment. You have been sacrificed to the Daedric Prince Molag Bal and are trapped without a soul in his realm, Coldharbour, a corrupted parallel of Tamriel. Your escape and subsequent journey to reclaim your soul will form the basis of both *The Elder Scrolls Online*'s personal narrative and its dynamic events system. Periodically, enormous chains called Dark Anchors will fall from the sky and begin pulling Tamriel into Coldharbour. Defeating these is the key to progression within the Fighter's Guild, and each encounter scales to match the players fighting it.





Crafting involves mixing materials and additives together. Each of the latter has special properties, discovered through experimentation. It's a logical progression from *Skyrim*'s alchemy

Out of combat, every character has access to stealth by crouching, which changes the crosshair into the traditional eye-like status indicator. Sneaking is an option for many quests, and a disguise system enables you to wear enemy uniforms over your armour. You move faster while disguised, but alert enemies are capable of breaking your cover if you get too close.

The Elder Scrolls Online's instancing is subtle. Key characters change location, so it's not uncommon to leave a dungeon to find the quest-dispensing NPC standing outside waiting to give you your reward, while hub towns are entirely optional. Convenience aside, there's some impressive variability on display. The choices the player makes affect who will be present in their storyline and which characters will accompany them on missions. Although your progress from level 1 to 50 will be bound to your chosen faction, a subsequent new game plus option allows you to play through the other two sides' quests with enhanced difficulty and rewards. It's an elegant solution to endgame PvE.

MMOGs are necessarily the product of compromise between the needs of the individual and the needs of the many. In making a multiplayer *Elder Scrolls* game, Zenimax Online has chosen to compromise on dynamic town life, crime and physics, among other features. If that's the sum of what the series means to you, then this is not the game you're looking for. If you are willing to focus on other aspects of the *Elder Scrolls* formula, however – combat, questing and crafting in particular – then this is an MMOG with real promise, one that not only inherits mechanics from its source material, but also seeks to improve upon them. ■





Q&A
Matt Firor
Game director, Zenimax Online

The last few years haven't been especially kind to traditional MMOGs. What, in your mind, is the key to bucking that trend?
The biggest single thing you can do to ensure your MMOG is successful is take your time and do it right. You only have one chance to launch, [so] you've got to make sure that you have a full range of features for a full range of people. I like to think of it more as we're making a world that we want people to live in. Yes, there's a game there, but there's a lot of games in the game. We want to make sure there's just a ton of stuff for you to do.

There will be players whose first *Elder Scrolls* game was *Skyrim* and whose expectations have been set by that game. How do you communicate the ways in which you're different?
Well, we exist in the same universe. We're making an *Elder Scrolls* game, but we're not making *Skyrim 2*. So I think the *Skyrim* guys had that same problem when they went from *Oblivion* to *Skyrim*: "Your last thing was Oblivion, how could you possibly top that?" We're not trying to 'top' *Skyrim*. [It's] a fantastic game – if you wanted to play *Skyrim*, go play *Skyrim*, right?

What is your relationship with the *Elder Scrolls* community? Could it be improved?
I think that the reaction that we had when we announced the game was more about having heard game developers say things about games for a long time and then [not seeing] what they were talking about. A lot of the mixed reaction that we got was [aimed] in that direction. It wasn't necessarily about *Elder Scrolls*. There was some of that, but mostly it was, 'Yeah, yeah, we've heard of [action-based] combat systems, we've heard that. We get into the game and it's the same old thing.' We want people to get in and play. We're not going to sit them down and give them a presentation, they're just going to sit down and play it.

Was the decision to add a firstperson mode based on public demand?
Yes and no. We always knew it was something players were going to want. We couldn't actually do it – and we're still in the process of doing it – because when you have other players seeing your character from a different distance from where you're seeing it, a lot of systems have to be designed. We needed to make sure we had the thirdperson working first, not just because it was your camera, but because it's how everyone else sees you in the world. But we've known for a long time that we were going to do it.

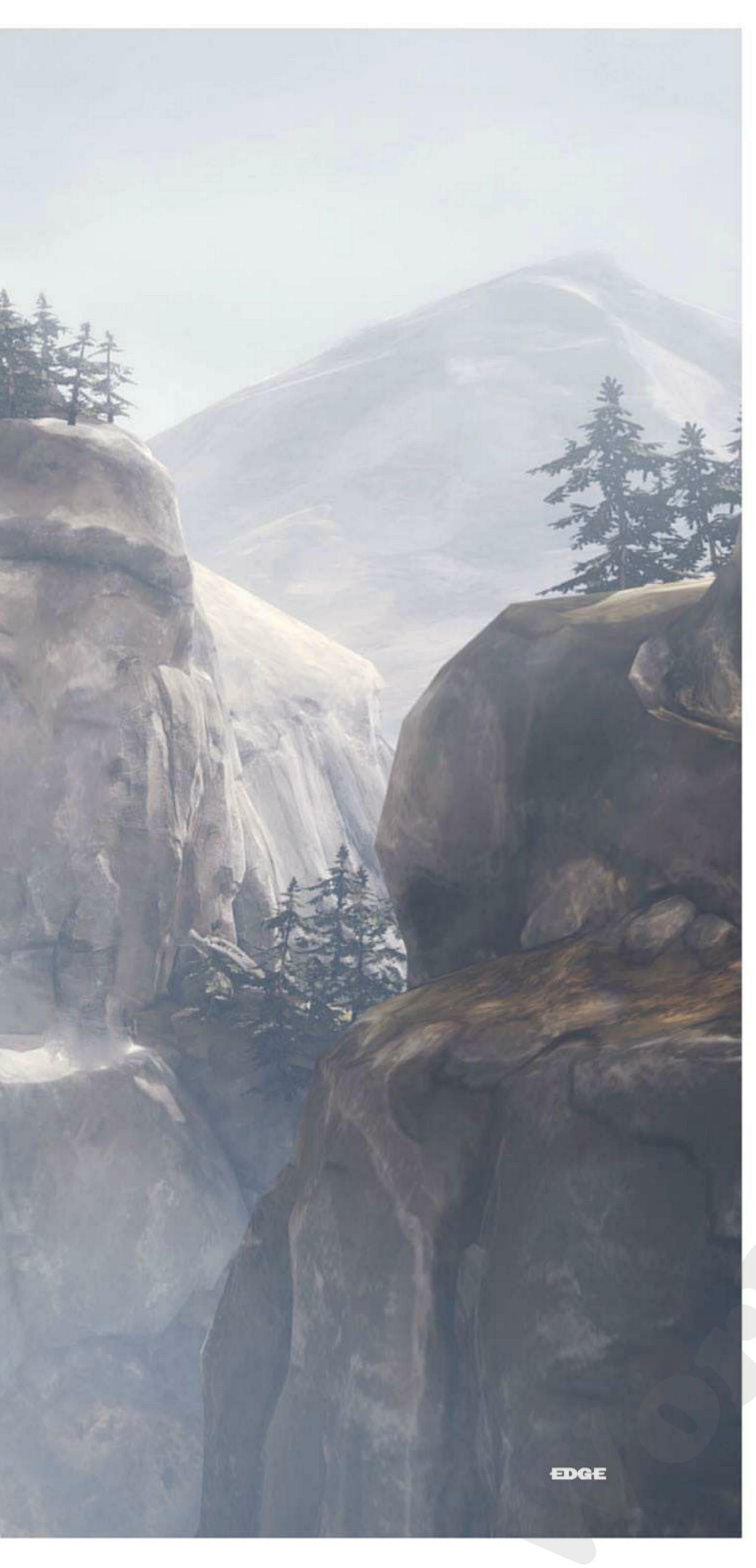


BROTHERS: A TALE OF TWO SONS

Film director Josef Fares embraces interactivity for Starbreeze's first fairytale

Publisher	505 Games
Developer	Starbreeze Studios
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	Sweden
Release	Spring

Both the brothers' animations are natural and full of character thanks to the use of motion capture, and Fares suggests their tale will centre on personal growth



Josef Fares is a successful Swedish filmmaker and the director of *Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons*. His gaming debut is being developed by a small team at Starbreeze, the studio behind *The Darkness* and *The Chronicles Of Riddick*, and it's a far cry from the dark, violent games that the developer is famous for. Instead *Brothers* is a charming and colourful fairytale puzzle-platformer with a smart twin-stick control system.

Fares, a long-time gamer, has been granted complete creative control by publisher 505 Games – something he often has to fight for in the film business. "Many publishers have destroyed games," he says. "If EA came to me and said, 'Do you want to make a game?' I'd say yes, but they couldn't have a single word of input. If they tried, I wouldn't make it."

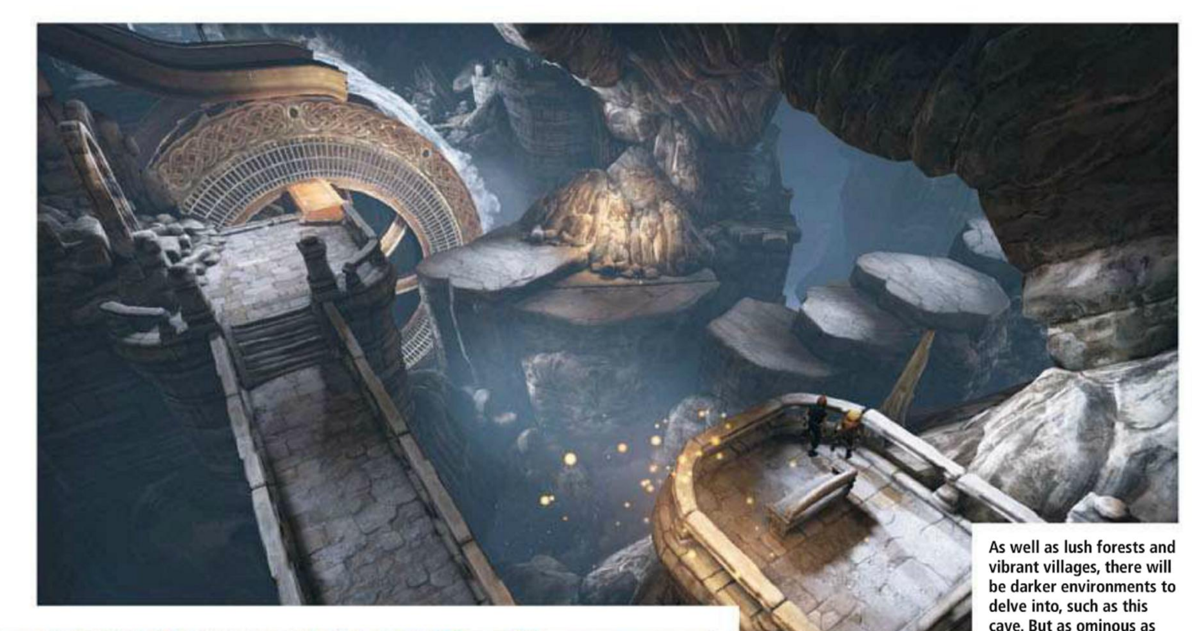
Starbreeze's last game, *Syndicate* – made for EA, as it happens – was developed by a team of over 100. The company's CEO, Mikael Nermark, told us there were 15 producers on it. In comparison, around 30 staff are working on *Brothers* alongside Fares. Not only is the latter writing and directing the game, he's performing motion capture for it, too.

"People think because of my background [that] it's just going to be a lot of cutscenes, but it's all about the gameplay," he explains. "I truly love the interactivity of gaming. I appreciate things like *The Walking Dead* and *Heavy Rain*, but they are not the future of games. Even with the choices you get to make, it's just another way of telling a story. You can do much more than that in games."



BROTHERS: A TALE OF TWO SONS

BELOW **The brothers scale a treacherous mountain, looking down on a village they explored earlier. The way the world is connected gives you a palpable sense of being on a journey**



As well as lush forests and vibrant villages, there will be darker environments to delve into, such as this cave. But as ominous as it looks, *Brothers* is not fraught with danger. Fares wants the game to be as relaxing as possible

You control two characters, Big Brother and Little Brother, with one controller. Each sibling has an analogue stick and a single button assigned to him, and you'll navigate both of them through the world at once. A dynamic fixed camera frames the pair's movements; as they move apart, it rises higher into the air and reveals more of the environment around them.

The game will clock in at around four hours, but Fares is adamant that length isn't as important as people think, responding defensively to our suggestion that some may complain about the runtime. "We could have easily made this a ten-hour game by recycling gameplay, but we haven't. We want to keep the player curious all the time. When you play *Brothers*, you'll have no idea what's coming next, and I guarantee you'll never guess what's going to happen at the end."

Every puzzle, challenge, and obstacle you encounter will offer a new type of gameplay, Starbreeze pledges. It's almost a *WarioWare*-style parade of minigames, but one linked seamlessly together. In one example, the brothers drift down a mountain valley, clinging to a hang glider. To turn corners, you have to shift their weight independently by shimmying from side to side along the frame. In another, one brother runs in a giant hamster wheel to activate a mechanism and lower a bridge for the other to cross.

"Replayability is overrated. Even with a great game like *Half-Life 2*, most will only play through it once. For me, everything is about the experience. It's not about the length, and *Brothers* is as long as it's supposed to be. No one ever questions a film about whether it's an hour or two hours long. You ask whether it's good or bad. Many games these days outstay their welcome."

"I don't see Brothers as a game that's only artistic. It's accessible, too"

With its simple control system and compressed length, *Brothers* has hints of thatgamecompany's *Journey*, but the art design isn't as abstract. The storybook world is vividly realised, brought to life by bold, charming characters and hazy, sun-dappled scenery. It's also packed with detail, and interacting with the environment is part of the fun. Press one of the brothers' assigned action buttons near an object or person and they'll react in different, often humorous, ways, reflecting their distinct personalities.

The brothers rely on each other to progress, and it's not simply a case of big protecting little. Big Brother's size and strength will solve some puzzles, while Little Brother's smaller frame and speed will be the solution to others.

Fares is also keen to stress that this style of play isn't what you'd normally expect: "This will sound like Peter Molyneux, but you've never played anything like this before. If this was a more complicated game, you'd have to learn new mechanics all the time. But because both brothers only have one button each, you can change the gameplay all the time without confusing the player. I don't see



Two sons, one vision

Brothers' world, although linear and viewed from a fixed perspective, is both large and connected. Occasionally, the camera will dip and you'll catch a glimpse of the landscapes and architecture that you'll visit later. While no doubt a decision forced by the game's twin-stick control system – the right stick controls a brother, not a camera – the fixed view does a deft job of relating the geography of the environments. The settings take obvious cues from fantasy and fairytales, but there's a boldness in their design. You can see Fares' directorial eye at play in every scene, too, and you're rarely far from the next lavish vista.



ABOVE **This giant may look intimidating, but he's one of the many friends the brothers make on their quest. He's involved in several puzzles, and in one scene picks the brothers up and hurls them across an otherwise impassable ravine**

Brothers as a game that's only artistic. It's accessible, too."

Brothers tries its best to avoid overt gaming staples, deliberately eschewing onscreen prompts and a HUD. But there is one concession to modern videogame design: achievements. They aren't awarded for simply finishing levels, however, but for taking the time to interact with them. Fares is against the idea of games rewarding you arbitrarily for having made progress.

Because just as rewarding are the little vignettes that can be found everywhere. There's a young girl playing with a ball, which you can grab and drop down a nearby well, making her cry. You'll meet a white bunny rabbit that's been ostracised from its black-coated brothers, which you can catch and cover in soot so it's accepted back into the group. It's a completely linear game, but the density of things to discover makes up for it.

The two brothers are on a quest to find a cure for their dying father, but Fares says there will be more to discover about the story if you look deeper. "I understand that games are games, and films are films, but they can still inspire each other. In a film you have a character who starts somewhere then grows to something else, and I've brought that narrative to *Brothers*."

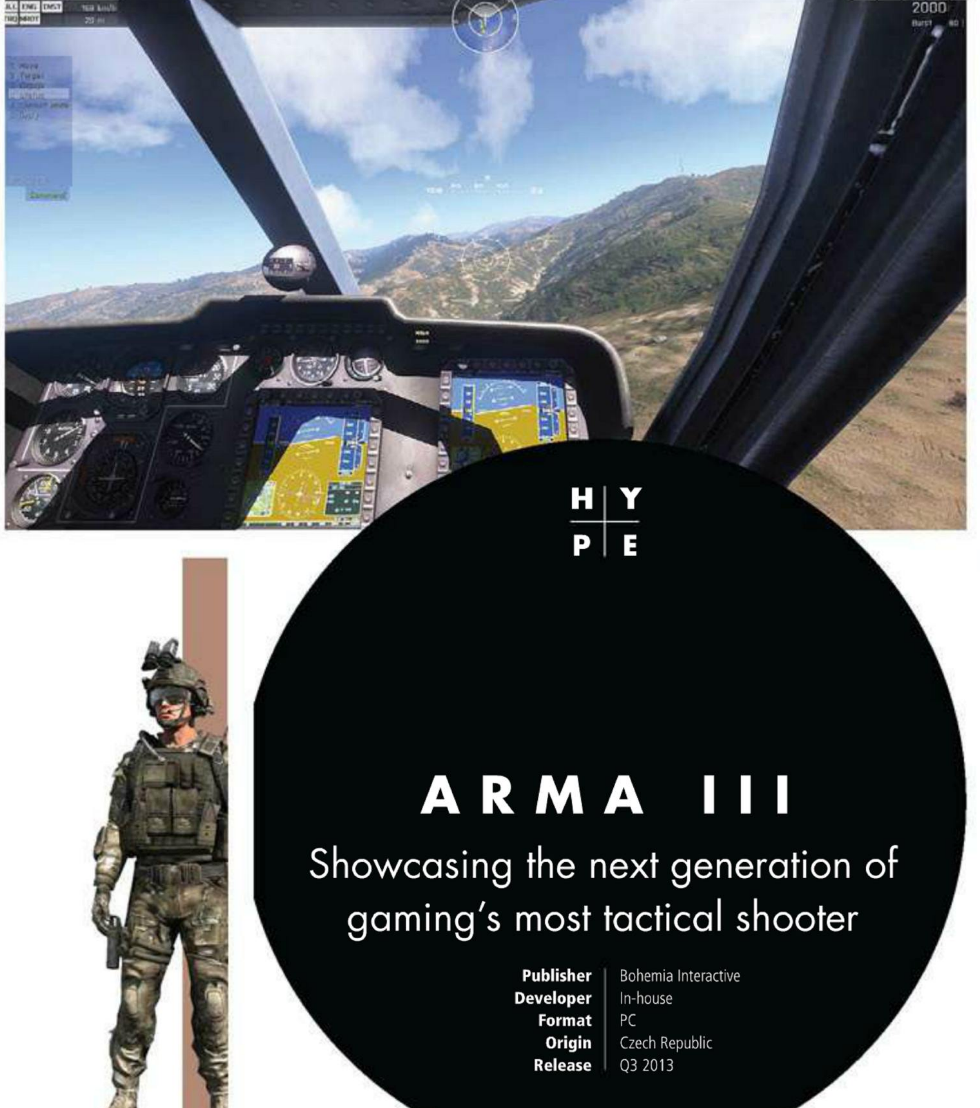
It's clear that Fares both understands and loves games, which gives him an edge over a lot of filmmakers who've been involved in the medium. *Brothers* is a simple game, but like its creator, it has a fiercely independent spirit. It's also a chance for Starbreeze to broaden out and take a break from shooters after *Syndicate*'s disappointing performance.

"Of course the industry needs big games like *Call Of Duty*, but it also need more games like *Brothers*," Fares says. "That's where the business will be revolutionised, and these are the games that will change the industry. In the future, I believe interactive art will become bigger than film, poetry, and music. That's a big thing to say, but I think human beings just want to be touched emotionally, and if you can do that in an interactive way, the effect is even more powerful." ■



Player models are much improved and they're well animated – little wonder, with all those stances to cycle through. They're hugely customisable, too

BELOW Visually, this isn't quite a generational leap, but *Arma III* is beautiful at times. You'll want different settings for different situations, though. At ground level, detail is king, but up high it's worth sacrificing fidelity for draw distance



Bohemia has adopted the *Minecraft* model: those paying now get access to the beta and the full version for free. It's smart, making fans feel involved as well as helping fund the game

HYPE

ARMA III

Showcasing the next generation of gaming's most tactical shooter

Publisher	Bohemia Interactive
Developer	In-house
Format	PC
Origin	Czech Republic
Release	Q3 2013

There is no starker indicator of *Arma III*'s granularity than its stance system. Press and hold Left Ctrl, and WASD will no longer govern your movement, but your posture. You can lean and sidestep, too, peering and peeking out of cover to shoot at a distant enemy before ducking back to safety. To shift from fully upright to lying on your side on the ground requires you to press the S key eight times. Thank heavens there's a key that sends you immediately prone, and another to stand you back up again.

There's a key for just about everything in fact, with few spare spots on the keyboard and some used more than once. *Arma III* is a memory game as much as a military one, and you can expect frequent trips to the pause screen to remind yourself of the contents of one of its numerous control menus. Even old hands will need the occasional refresher, because all is not as it once was: one of the messier changes from *Arma II* means that here a tap of G throws a grenade, whereas in the previous game it brought up the gear menu.

The setting for this paid alpha is Stratis, a sun-dappled Greek island of rolling hills, fishing villages and military bases, which at 20km² is a fraction of the size of Altis, the 270km² landmass in the final game.

Multiplayer is slow-paced and precise, at least with default player counts (some servers support 64 players, but most hold around 20). Thought *Battlefield 3*'s long trudges from base to front line were punishment enough for carelessness? Here, death means a two-minute respawn timer and, unless you happen across a vehicle, a jog of several kilometres to link back up with your comrades. You'll have to resist the temptation to sprint on the way: fatigued soldiers struggle to keep a steady aim. The solution? Don't die.



The infantry Showcase is the logical starting point for newcomers, serving as a gentle introduction to basic movement controls

Recognising that this acquired taste is likely to deter as many players as it attracts, Bohemia has smartly bundled this paid alpha with four singleplayer missions. Dubbed Showcases, these are intended to provide a slightly less punishing environment in which to learn *Arma III*'s mechanics and features. One sees a squad of infantry push down a valley into a small seaside town; another has you sneak into a hilltop base and steal a vehicle, using its grenades to destroy enemy APCs and communications. The third puts you in the cockpit of a helicopter tasked with taking out mortar teams and convoys. In the best of the lot, you don scuba gear, disarm underwater mines and sabotage a patrol boat, sneaking ashore and pilfering the enemy's RPG launcher to use against their air support.

In the best Showcase, you don scuba gear, disarm mines and sabotage a patrol boat

Accessibility is a focus, but this is not an easy game. Enemy AI is mixed – they're lightning-fast spotters, and in the scuba mission will raise the alarm at the merest sight of your wetsuited head – but they can be gormless, oblivious of your presence despite the sniper rounds that just whizzed past their heads. They shoot straight, though. Take two hits, perhaps three, and you're done.

It's only an alpha, but this is already a full package, with single- and multiplayer mod support, and deep character customisation options all included – and those paying now get access to the beta and end product.

It's been a challenging 12 months for Bohemia. Its plans were surely thrown off course by the success of the internally developed *Arma II* zombie mod *DayZ* and then the arrest of two senior dev staff in Greece on suspicion of espionage. We suspect there will be relief now that the focus is back where it belongs: on one of the most complex, tactical and rewarding shooters around. ■



Wasteland 2?

Even in this alpha phase, modding is a huge part of *Arma III*'s appeal. The flexible, if intimidating, editor gives you an overhead view of the map on which you place friendly and hostile forces. Bohemia says that, in the fullness of time, all legacy user-created *Arma II* scenarios will be supported; Wasteland, one of the most popular, is already there and is a frequent sight in the server browser. In it, three teams face off against each other, but you'll have to worry about food and water as well as other players. Impromptu mission objectives – capturing a specific vehicle or supply drop, say – change the flow, and focus, of battle.



CARD HUNTER

Drawing on a rich back catalogue, from boardgames to BioShock

Publisher	Blue Manchu
Developer	In-house
Format	Mac, PC (browser-based)
Origin	US
Release	TBC



Holding several armour cards can easily negate strikes, since successive dice checks are made to see if each one blocks points of damage

ABOVE *Card Hunter* plays in Flash through browsers, so it's widely accessible. Blue Manchu foresaw the Facebook game bubble bursting, so the game doesn't currently use it. RIGHT The card collection genre has boomed in recent years, though Chey says it looked dead when he started making *Card Hunter*. "We lucked out that that all changed"



One particularly big challenge for the project has been building equally strong single- and multiplayer modes, which Chey says have almost contradictory balance requirements

What game might the co-founder of Irrational Games, the indie creator of *ROM Check Fail* and *Captain Forever*, and one of the designers behind *Ultima Underworld II*, *Thief* and *BioShock* make together? Chances are you're thinking of an imaginative, narrative-based, RPG-inflected, systems-heavy firstperson game, probably involving shooting, maybe stealth, and a lot of choice and thinking.

You'd be right on two counts. Blue Manchu's debut is an RPG, but *Card Hunter* has closer ties to the tabletop than the dungeons of Britannia. And, being a turn-based strategy game played with counters and dice, it features a lot of choice and thinking. Led by developers including **Jonathan Chey**, Jarrad 'Farbs' Woods and Dorian Hart, it's a return to the prehistory of the videogame, albeit as a free-to-play game for browsers. And it adds another variable to the mix – card collection, in the same vein as Magic: The Gathering. As it happens, original Magic designer Richard Garfield is a consultant.

The action itself takes place on boards depicting rooms or caverns, which are presented as if laid on a tabletop to evoke classic boardgames such as Dungeon! Your party of up to three heroes starts on one side of the board, facing several enemies. Each hero has a hand of four cards, each of which gives him or her an action in a single turn. Dash and Walk allow movement of a set maximum number of squares, Chop and Simple Strike hit enemies for set damage, and block cards are played automatically when your hero is attacked, with dice rolls determining success or failure. You play one of your three heroes' cards and then it's your enemy's turn.

"In my years of working at Irrational, I got told not to make turn-based games a lot," says Chey, who during his time with the studio ended up in a management position that absorbed most of his creative time. "The very first game we started working on was a turn-based strategy game, launching spaceships from a space carrier and flying them around – basically Red Baron the boardgame in space. Unfortunately, we had to abandon it, because we couldn't get anyone to publish it."

Not that Chey envisaged *Card Hunter* as the first game his new studio would complete. After two years' gardening leave, it was just one in a whole list of projects he wanted to tackle, but its appealing simplicity made it easy for him to start prototyping with just paper and pencil. "Then when I had the idea that your deck in the game would be built by equipping items onto your character's paper doll," he says, "I thought it was one of the few really good original design ideas that I've ever had. So that made me want to pursue it to its conclusion."

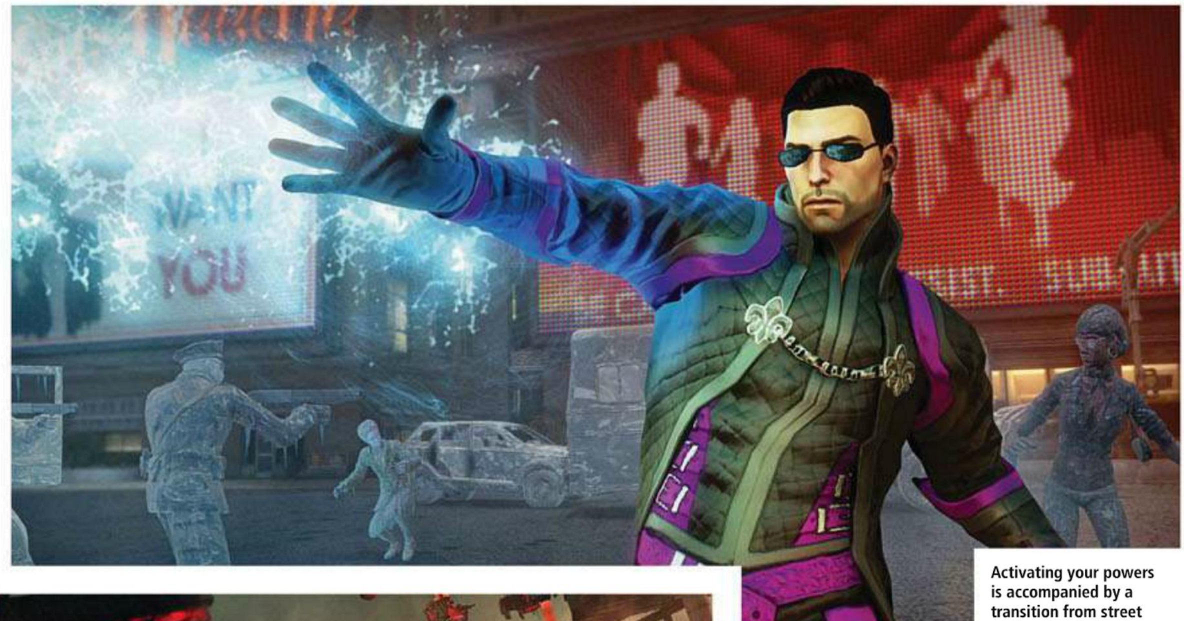
Heroes' cards are drawn from their own decks, the contents of which are determined by the gear they have equipped. Shoes tend to provide movement and armour cards, weapons give attacks and wands give magical actions. You can see how many cards enemy units are holding, whether they're controlled by AI for the game's campaign or other people in multiplayer, although attack cards' faces are concealed. This helps you make tactical decisions about how to play. If no units have useful actions, you can pass your turn; if both players pass, new cards are dealt to all.

These rules just cross the threshold of *Card Hunter*'s strategic depths, which are currently being further honed in a closed beta. The game might be a surprise choice for Blue Manchu, but it lives up to the smartness and originality of its creators' back catalogues.



Dungeon decor

Card Hunter's tabletop visual style is down to, Chey says, "One part nostalgia, one part novelty." The team wanted to avoid both 8bit retro and modern glossy shader effects. "The only suggestion I could offer [art director] Ben Lee was to look at really old-school fantasy RPG art – the really, really bad '70s stuff when Gary Gygax was drawing pictures for his own rule books." He admits it was a pretty bad idea, but it ended up informing a surprisingly coherent style that permeates the entire game, with paid-for currency represented by pizza (bought from Papa Manchu's takeaway) and a rule book displaying quest storylines.



Activating your powers is accompanied by a transition from street clothes to this leather getup. *SRIV* may have a Matrix-inspired premise, but the Saints' leader is a more conventional hero than the Wachowskis' Neo

BELOW **The game's alien invasion has led to new structures being bolted on (or hovering over) the city, ensuring there's stuff to jump on besides roofs**



H | Y
P | E

SAINTS ROW IV

Volition wants to up the ante again in this superpowered sequel

Publisher	Deep Silver
Developer	Volition
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	US
Release	August 20 (US), 23 (EU)

***Saints Row IV*'s aliens have been designed to force you to use your new powers, but could this get in the way of the juvenile fun of torturing Steelport's 'normal' citizens?**

S*aints Row IV* casts you as the US President, the leader of the free world. Oh, and you have superpowers. It's at once audacious and strangely inevitable. Audacious because the sheer silliness of the concept is, even by this series' standards, a step well beyond what's come before. Inevitable because after *Saints Row: The Third* so thoroughly explored what was possible within the loosely defined boundaries of a ground- and vehicle-based open-world crime game, there really was nowhere left to turn.

"Obviously, after *Saints Row: The Third* we spent a lot of time thinking about, 'What do we next? What the heck is *Saints Row IV* going to be?'" admits Volition senior producer **Jim Boone**. "We talked a lot about what it is we think makes *Saints Row: The Third* work. Why people enjoyed the game. What it was we could do even more in *Saints Row IV*. And the areas that stood out to us the most was, well, number one was the over-the-top nature of *The Third*. There's no other game out there like it."

If *The Third* was the game that saw *Saints Row* finally exorcise the ghost of its origins as a straight-faced, *GTA*-inspired gangsta rap video and embrace its new role as a mascot for the dispossessed seekers of cartoon craziness that Rockstar left behind, then *Saints Row IV* sees Volition confirming that new identity a thousand times over. The introduction of superpowers feels practically belated after everything else *The Third* managed to squeeze in across its runtime, and enables the series to upstage titles such as *Infamous* and *Crackdown*, just as it did its original inspiration. It's still clearly playing to the gallery, of course, joyfully sacrificing things like coherence, consistency, polish, and genuine meaning in pursuit of quick thrills and cheap laughs. And why not? Volition has found a formula that works.

"*Saints Row: The Third* was a lot of fun," Boone says. "Whenever we had a decision to make, fun was always the thing that would win in any debate. [*Saints Row IV*] is definitely more over the top than *Saints Row: The Third* by quite a fair margin. But it's all done in the spirit of fun."

It could only be this fun-before-function mentality that has led to such creations as the Dubstep Gun, a weapon that essentially fires the pounding beats and flashing lights of a dancefloor at groups of unsuspecting victims, who then proceed to, well, dance around a bit. We suppose it could be useful for crowd control. The Inflate-O-Ray is a bit more lethal, seeing as it causes victims' heads to grotesquely (and hilariously) expand before they burst like overinflated balloons. Neither of these weapons have been designed with practical value in mind: they're disposable toys, built for laughs.

Crucially, you can combine the new skills with the series' traditional combat abilities

The new superpowers, however, seem a lot more tightly woven into the game. Blast lets you freeze both people and objects before smashing them into icy smithereens, while telekinesis should reliably offer physics-based fun. Crucially, you can combine the new skills with the series' traditional combat abilities. "You can shoot [enemies] if you want," Boone explains. "Player choice is still totally there; it's still a *Saints Row* game. All of the abilities are incredibly intuitive and easy to use."

Chief among these new powers is a ludicrously powerful jump and glide. It's a move with obvious analogues in both *Prototype* and *Infamous*, but in terms of sheer skyscraper-bounding freedom, it leaves them hovering somewhere around the middle floor. This new means of navigation has led to Volition overhauling the returning city of Steelport's rooftops and other elevated surfaces. And, the team argues, it makes the environment feel fresh again, even if this is its second outing.

That might be true, but *Saints Row IV*'s point of origin as a standalone expansion for the third game might also explain the asset reuse. *SRIV*'s premise sees the leader of the Saints (who in the interim just happens to have been elected President of the United States of America) kidnapped by aliens and implanted into a virtual version of Steelport. It's a Matrix parody, basically, as watching a stirred-up bunch of Steelport police officers glitchily transforming into alien invaders, Agent-style, confirms.

Perhaps *Saints Row* needs no more excuses to go nuts – it's not as if *The Third* let things like feasibility, the player's suspension of disbelief or consistency get in the way of high-concept mission design (it did, after all, feature a zombie outbreak). Even so, we expect the transition to an explicitly simulated world means anything goes.

That said, there's none of the series' trademark crassness on display in the snippets we see. In fact, once you get past the fact the American head of state is elbow-dropping members of the electorate, everything seems rather tame. Perhaps this is the legacy of Jason Rubin, THQ's final president, who claimed to want to transform the series into something more mainstream. More likely, the really shocking stuff is being held back for later trailers. Either way, it'd be a shame if *Saints Row* has entirely neutered its edgier streak. The series' problem was never its reliance on adult humour, per se, but a genuinely depressing fixation on sexualised violence and prostitution. If that can be dialled down for this superpowered instalment, then by all means bring on the weaponised purple dildos. ■

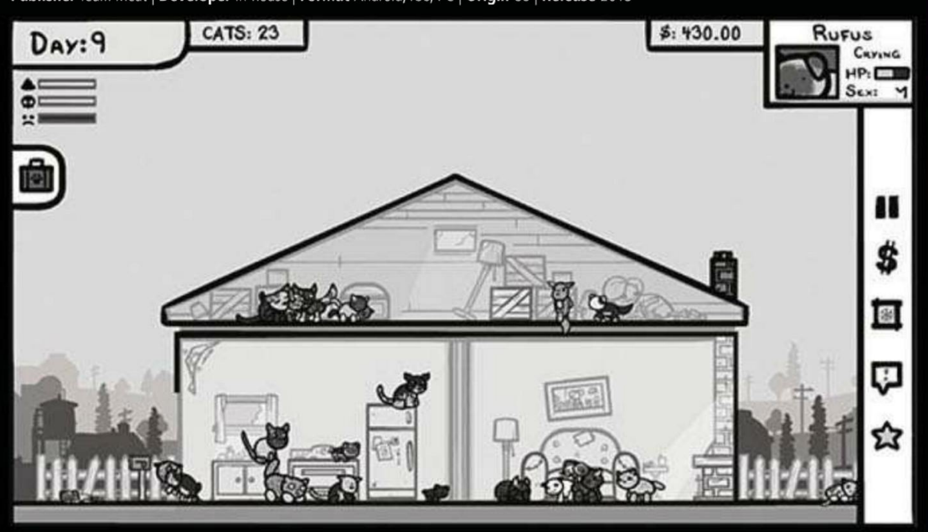


The personal touch

Customisation has always been an important part of *Saints Row*. To its credit, it's one of the few series to offer a genuine breadth of choice in not just the appearance but even the voice of your character. Being able to select from a wacky variety of weapon skins provides an extra layer of self-expression this time around. "You want to make your rocket launcher look like a guitar case? Go for it!" Boone exclaims, before strolling into a weapon shop and doing just that. Personally, we'd have opted for the parody of the SNES Super Scope. It's a fun addition, in short, although we're already wincing at the thought of paid-for DLC.

MEW-GENICS

Publisher Team Meat | **Developer** In-house | **Format** Android, iOS, PC | **Origin** US | **Release** 2013



Team Meat has finally begun to explain the mechanics behind its monochromatic *Super Meat Boy* follow-up. Admitting in a blog post that it's a hard game to explain, Edmund McMillen weaves a disturbing tale of his attempts to find a mate for a fat feline named Puddle in the game. One candidate is attacked while eating and comes to associate food with pain, then starves to death. Another is narcoleptic – a trait he passes on to his offspring, stymying McMillen's dream of their following in their mother's footsteps and winning a beauty pageant. It's typically left-field stuff from the brain behind *The Binding Of Isaac*.

COMPANY OF HEROES 2

Publisher Sega | **Developer** Relic Entertainment
Format PC | **Origin** Canada | **Release** June 25



As soon as rumours broke that Sega was winning the bidding for Relic Entertainment in the sale of THQ's assets, it felt like a good fit. *Total War* is, after all, one of the few jewels in Sega's crown these days, especially after the fiasco with *Aliens: Colonial Marines*, so there can be few better custodians for Relic's long-awaited RTS sequel. A closed beta is imminent, and Sega has already given *Company Of Heroes 2* something THQ never could: a firm release date.

TENYA WANYA TEENS

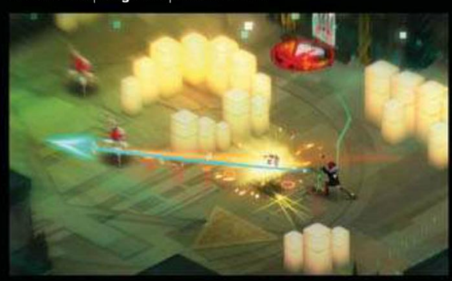
Publisher TBC | **Developer** Uvula
Format PC | **Origin** Japan | **Release** TBC



Keita Takahashi hasn't stopped making games entirely. This silly party game is described by collaborator Brandon Boyer as a "coming-of-age tale about love, hygiene, monsters and finding discarded erotic magazines in the woods" with each player using a hulking, 16-button arcade stick to play.

TRANSISTOR

Publisher Supergiant Games | **Developer** In-house
Format TBC | **Origin** US | **Release** 2014



The biggest challenge facing Supergiant was how it could follow up *Bastion*. *Transistor* is another isometric action-RPG, but it's no straight sequel, with a debut trailer revealing a sci-fi setting, female protagonist and new combat mechanics. A 2014 release suggests the studio has next-gen in mind.

A BIRD STORY

Publisher Freebird Games | **Developer** In-house
Format PC | **Origin** US | **Release** Summer



To The Moon was a heart-rending tale with a witty script and delightful music, but a decidedly average videogame. Freebird's follow-up is set in the same universe, but before the events of the first game, and its tale of a boy and a bird with a broken wing will be narrative-driven but dialogue-free.

ZENO CLASH II

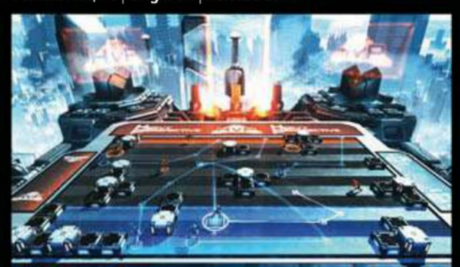
Publisher Atlus | **Developer** ACE Team
Format 360, PC, PS3 | **Origin** Chile | **Release** 2013



After *Dishonored*, we're open to the prospect of an entire game of firstperson melee combat, and *Zeno Clash II* looks like just the ticket. There are juggle combos and a superpowered Rage mode, but it's not all fisticuffs: magic spells and wrestling moves are also at your disposal.

FROZEN ENDZONE

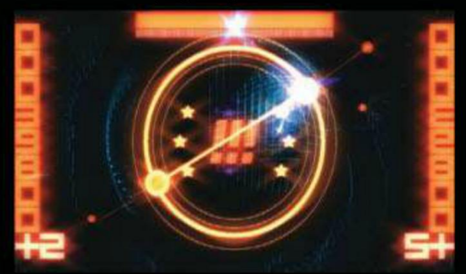
Publisher Mode 7 Games | **Developer** In-house
Format Mac, PC | **Origin** UK | **Release** 2014



A turn-based take on American football, *Frozen Endzone* uses an updated version of *Frozen Synapse*'s UI to manage the movements of your team before watching turns play out. Mode 7's leap from guns to footballs may appear vast, but the sport has much in common with strategy games.

DROPCHORD

Publisher Double Fine | **Developer** In-house
Format iOS, Mac, PC, | **Origin** US | **Release** TBC



This is quite a departure for Double Fine, a rhythm-action game with a soundtrack seemingly plucked from an episode of Jersey Shore. PC and Mac versions are controlled using Leap Motion, a finger-tracking motion sensor that, it's claimed, is 200 times as accurate as Microsoft's Kinect.

PAYDAY 2

Publisher 505 Games | **Developer** Overkill Software
Format 360, PS3, PC | **Origin** Sweden | **Release** Summer



Overkill's sequel is a good deal more ambitious than last year's *The Heist*. Players choose one of four professions – Mastermind, Enforcer, Ghost and Tactician – and upgrade progress is persistent across the game. These distinct roles mean planning will be more important than in the original, and we're assured stealth is a viable option. Taking too much swag will slow down your escape, while some elements – metal detectors, guards and alarms – are randomised.

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SHROUD OF THE AVATAR: FORSAKEN VIRTUES

Publisher Portalarium | **Developer** In-house | **Format** Mac, PC | **Origin** US | **Release** TBC

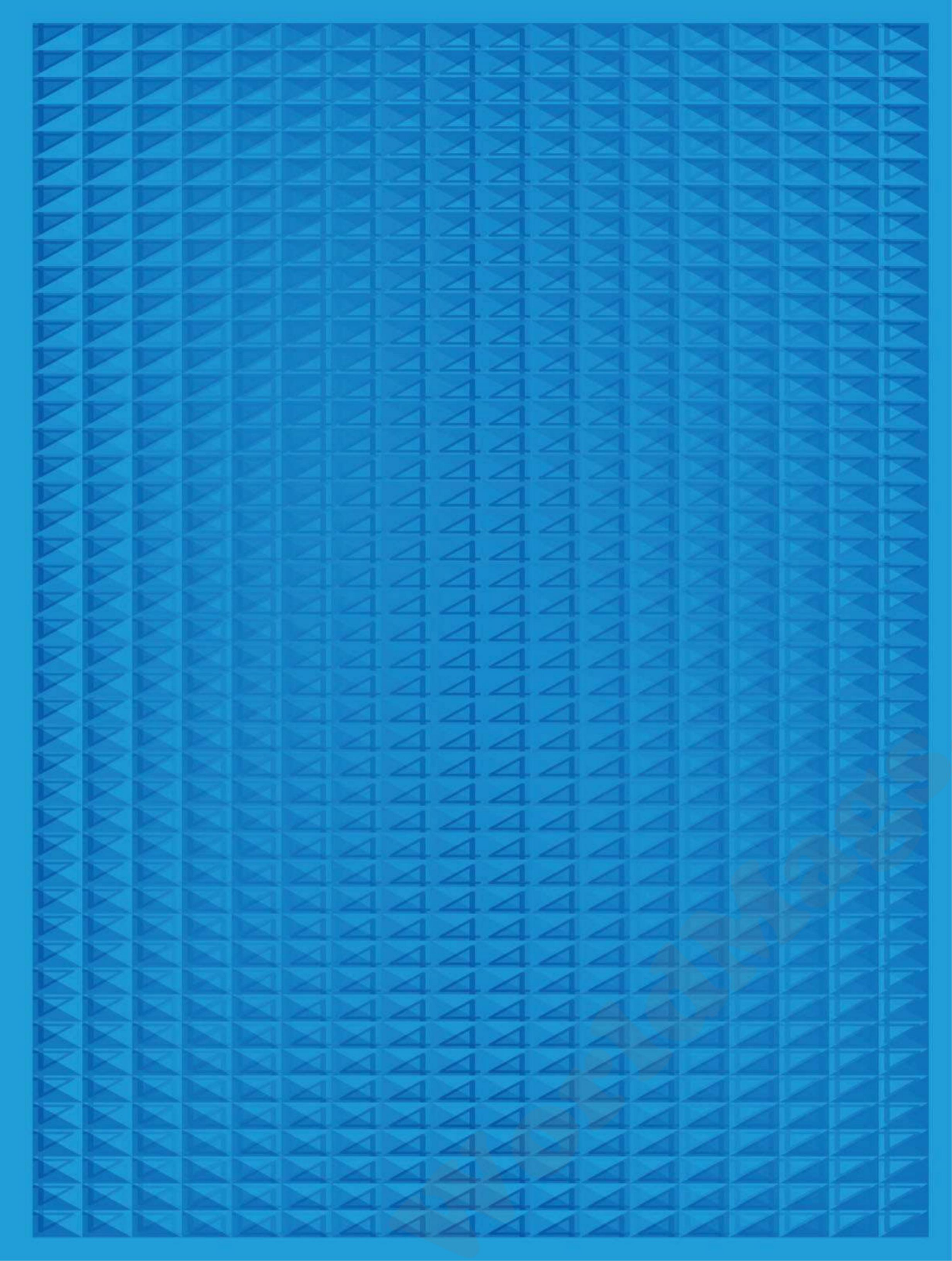


Richard Garriott may have drifted away from his gaming roots in recent years, dipping into online casino games, but now the *Ultima* creator has decided it's time for a spiritual successor to his classic RPG series. *Shroud Of The Avatar: Forsaken Virtues* might sound like it's been titled by an online RPG name generator, but behind that unwieldy appellation hides some potentially genre-changing ideas. Garriott wants to cut away the deadweight he feels plagues today's fantasy RPGs, streamlining crafting, loosening the definition of quests and even taking cues from *Journey* and *Dark Souls* to refresh multiplayer.



FOUR PLAY

The stakes are agonisingly high for **PlayStation 4**. In many ways, the fortunes of Sony at large depend on the launch of this hardware. In the pages to come, we chart PlayStation 4's five-year odyssey from whiteboard to webcast in unprecedented detail in order to understand Sony's plan to conquer the next generation. We talk to **Shuhei Yoshida**, the president of Worldwide Studios, who brought Sony's firstparty developers to the table to fashion their dream console, and get a behind-the-scenes glimpse of the process from two marquee studios: **Guerrilla Games** and **Evolution Studios**.





LAUNCH PAD

How a new culture of sharing within Sony shaped PS4

You know E3 is over when the hoary electronica blaring throughout the Los Angeles Convention Center gives way to the whine of industrial-grade power tools disassembling exhibitor booths. The show's 2012 instalment ends with a palpable fizzle. The next-gen hardware announcements that most were hoping for never materialised. Most game developers in attendance have made a beeline for LAX to catch the next available flight home. **Matt Southern**, studio game director of *MotorStorm* developer Evolution Studios, won't be rushing back to the UK just yet, however. He's sticking around to attend a top-secret PlayStation 4 summit – codenamed 'The Science Fair' – at a hotel in Santa Monica.

Southern has brought along a greybox track that's in development for his studio's next-gen racing launch title, *Driveclub*, which won't be announced to the public for another eight months. He and his colleagues at Evolution have been intimately involved in the design of a new PlayStation controller and this gathering provides a chance to demonstrate how its improved rumble helps players with precision cornering as well as how its high-frequency, latency-free gyrometers make steering by tilting the controller a viable alternative to traditional analogue sticks.

The summit's atmosphere is playful and upbeat, which might have something to do with the fact that **Shuhei Yoshida**, president of Sony Computer Entertainment (SCE) Worldwide Studios, decided that this year alcohol would be served during some of the presentations so that attendees would be, in his words, "freer to express their ideas". With drinking and driving not a concern in this context, developers and engineers eagerly join the queue to set a time on the *Driveclub* track. "It felt like the old [days of the] arcade," Southern tells us when reflecting on the scene.

In attendance are some 20 key representatives from Sony's firstparty studios – Naughty Dog, SCE Santa Monica, Guerrilla Games, Media Molecule et al. These meetings have been taking place since 2005, since the formation of Worldwide Studios, as a means of bringing Sony's developers together to share projects, compare best practices and discuss issues of the day. They happen two or three times a year, usually around events such as E3 and GDC. In recent years, key hardware engineers from Sony Computer Entertainment, Inc's (SCEI) Tokyo HQ have been invited to attend to glean feedback from the people developing on the hardware that will become PS4.

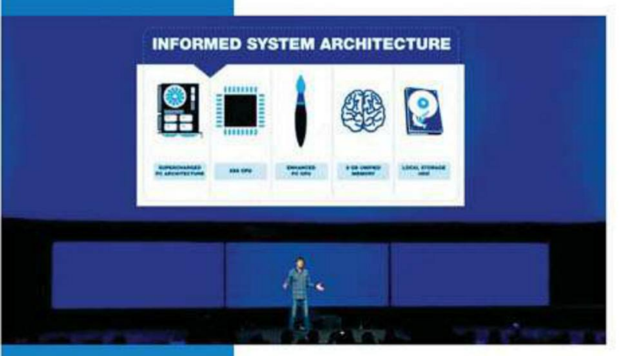
The cross-pollination of ideas at the heart of those firstparty developer gatherings permeates the entire story of PS4's evolution from concept to console. When Sony took the stage at New York City's Hammerstein Ballroom in late February to uncork its next-gen vision, the five design pillars the company discussed – simple, immediate, social, integrated and personalised – apply not just to the hardware, but its development arc as well. Sony wasn't just unveiling a new and improved game console, it was unveiling a new and improved Sony, with a revised corporate philosophy.

"The Sony of today is a different Sony to five years ago," says **Michiel Van Der Leeuw**, Guerrilla's technical director. "I remember communication between the different regions wasn't always easy. You'd get in conflict with SCEI, and getting conversations started with people who actually made the hardware was not as easy as it is now, with them actively seeking support from Worldwide Studios.

"Nowadays when people from SCEI visit [us in Amsterdam], there's a bunch of people we know by name, we exchange emails. I'm Facebook friends with hardware engineers. It's a more collaborative



As if his role as PS4's lead system architect wasn't consuming enough, Mark Cerny's also serving as the game director on the cartoony *Knack*, which is under development at Sony Japan Studios



The concept of PS4's 'informed system architecture' refers to the deep collaboration with firstparty Sony studios. "We wanted to talk with [our studios] about a system that could really unleash their creativity," says **Michael Denny**





From top: Mark Cerny, PS4 lead system architect, and Michael Denny, VP of Worldwide Studios

process; there's lots of people thinking about how to make the best out of all the possibilities we have. I think you'll find the outcome of this is a much more balanced system. There's hardly any pitfalls left."

Something had to give. The famously embattled launch of PS3 was the final straw. Up until that point, the development of Sony's console platform was handled almost exclusively by the hardware group in Tokyo with negligible input from the company's firstparty studios. Yoshida credits Kaz Hirai, who succeeded Ken Kutaragi in late 2006 as president of Sony Computer Entertainment, for deciding that Worldwide Studios ought to play a far more integral role in helping shape the platform for which they'd be developing. "The keys had been given to us [then-president of Worldwide Studios Phil Harrison and me]," Yoshida explains.

Yoshida would be instrumental in handpicking PS4's lead system architect, Mark Cerny, who had a long history with Sony going back to the days when he worked as an executive producer on *Crash Bandicoot* for the original PlayStation. In addition to consulting on the creation of other key titles, such as Naughty Dog's *Jak And Daxter* and Insomniac's *Ratchet & Clank*, he also made a significant contribution on the technical side by helping develop the graphics engine and the common firstparty game engine used by Sony studios.

Cerny was the ideal conduit to bridge the divide between SCEI's hardware group and the pool of expertise in Worldwide Studios. Even with all his focus on the technology side, Cerny had never stopped working on game projects. He had a vested interest, then, in making sure PS4 was developer-friendly. And his fluency in Japanese helped dissolve communication barriers between SCEI and western studios. In late 2008, Cerny initiated a series of exhaustive, unmerciful PS3 post-mortems.

"That was a very long process," recalls Van Der Leeuw, one of the first developers outside Japan to be informed of the nascent PS4 project, then codenamed Orbis. "But it was amazing how many different conversations were going all at the same time about all sorts of different aspects of the console. We had very detailed discussions about specific hardware implementations of communication between the GPU and CPU with Mark. It was late-night phone calls, drawing diagrams and faxing them over the weekend, right up to discussions about, 'What do we do with the controller buttons?'"

> "Sony is a different Sony to five years ago… Communication wasn't always easy"

When Guerrilla managing director **Hermen Hulst** saw the five design pillars of PS4 flash up onscreen at the reveal in New York, he was concerned spectators would dismiss them as marketing spin on the vision for the console. "I recall, literally, these five points on the slides being part of the [PS3 post-mortem] conversations I was part of," says Hulst, "so there's been an incredible amount of consistency on the highest level from early onwards. How can we make it simple? How can we make it immediate? I remember Mark saying he hates the way that it's just…" Hulst nimbly self-edits, "let's just get that right."

Though it's apparent to almost any engaged observer that the tenets of Sony's PS4 vision carry implicit mea culpas about the PS3 hardware cycle, it's refreshing to hear an assurance that the system architect of Sony's new console got just as irritated as every other PS3 owner upon having his buzz killed by a lengthy firmware update.

The recurring theme of PS4's development – across the Worldwide Studios developer summits, the Cerny-orchestrated feedback groups and Sony's renovated corporate culture – is written right there on the controller above its new button: share. The very idea of the feature was proposed by Nathan Gary, creative director at SCE Santa Monica, who put together a presentation to pitch the button. "We all went, 'That's a brilliant idea!' says Yoshida, "so it was a pretty quick decision after he suggested it." The fact that the concept of a quick decision can even exist in a company as vast as Sony is an encouraging sign that transformative change is underway. Only a next-gen company can make a truly next-gen game console.



THRILL SHOT

Guerrilla Games on its magnificent Killzone demo and helping craft PS4

The *Killzone* series has evolved into a coveted technical showpiece for Sony's hardware, despite the furore over misleading *Killzone 2* footage being used to present PS3. *Shadow Fall* delivered, not only offering Sony a visually opulent live demo – its gameplay demands shaped the very device that will define how it feels to play PS4. What's more, it provides the quintessential example of the hardware's developer-friendly credentials. Studio boss Hermen Hulst and tech director Michiel Van Der Leeuw tell us how the studio's sumptuous shooter moulded PS4.





From top: Hermen Hulst, MD, and Michiel Van Der Leeuw, technical director

Because of the controversy over the prerendered target video for *Killzone 2* being touted by Sony executives as gameplay footage, did staging a live demo of *Shadow Fall* feel like redemption?

Hermen Hulst Right. That was one thing where we went, 'OK, next time we're going to be on a stage, we're going to make sure it's real.'

Michiel Van Der Leeuw And we made a point of not even claiming it was real – it was as a matter of course that it was real. And I think everybody was on board with that. There was so much drive for people to make things real – the fact that the OS got the machine to actually live record that gameplay session and live upload it to Facebook at that time. It was really prerelease stuff. SCEI was still working with us on the day before we flew. I was still fixing bugs in the office and on calls with Japan [before flying out] to make sure the Facebook upload would work. Anyway, it doesn't get much more real than that. And particularly to make a point, we said "no backup videos either".





How much of the Vekta cityscape we see in the demo's scenic flyover is a coherent gameplay space?

MVDL Well, you'll visit parts of the city, but it's not like an open-world city that you're flying over. It's made for that view and to give a sense of the world that you're in. You'll visit parts of the city, but I don't think we should go into too much detail on which parts you'll visit, because that might reveal too much of the story… And at the same time, while we don't want to claim it's going to be an open-world game, we should emphasise that the spaces are much larger and you'll visit some of them at a later stage.

Why did you drop the sequential numbering for this *Killzone* entry?

HH I think for context I like *1*, *2* and *3* personally, but with *Shadow Fall* it's a new platform, it's a new start for the franchise, with the new look, the new style player character.
I think the name now, as a Shadow Marshall operating in these shadows that are cast by this wall that's separating the two factions… It just felt right to call it that.

What was a rope doing hanging off the side of the dropship in the demo? Just for a giddying leap?

MVDL [Laughs] That was entirely for convenience, completely. You realise we've now managed to announce a game without crashing a dropship into the ground?

Tell us about the feedback groups within Worldwide Studios and their varied contributions to the design of the new PS4 hardware.

MVDL Of course, we at Guerrilla were involved in the circle about the platform and all the technical aspects, but at the same time there was a parallel group looking at the business and usability aspects. We had a lot of input from people who wanted to have different things for different parts of the machine. For example, the *SingStar* guys had a really different take on how important the latency of USB audio is than we do. And when you don't take that on board early on in the design, it becomes difficult to factor in late in development.

Based on who presented at PS4's reveal, there seemed to be a stronger western influence in this hardware generation for Sony.

HH The company has been good at just looking at who's best suited to take charge, and I think in that

> "We've got the right amount of memory, video card; everything's balanced out"

sense it didn't matter that Mark is an American or Shuhei is Japanese. You see this in people's travel schedules. Mark practically has one leg in Japan, one leg in America… We've had guys flying in for a presentation, going to London one day, next day to Amsterdam, travelling around the world trying to gather all the feedback, so definitely there's a lot more western-ness in Japan, but there's also a lot more of Japan going to the west.

Which things were highest on your next-gen hardware wishlist?

HH Well, I think 'Michiel's console' was just announced in New York.

MVDL We got pretty much everything that we wanted.

HH There were many very, very



A daytime setting was chosen for the *Shadow Fall* demo in part because it let Guerrilla show off what PS4 hardware allowed it to do with lighting and reflection

detailed conversations in different settings. So while Michiel was heavily involved in conversations about the hardware itself, we've had a lead coder and a lead designer on weekly or bi-weekly calls on the new controller. And that [involved] pushing hard and fighting battles on the indentation of the thumbsticks for us, being a shooter developer, [and] having outwardly curved triggers. Those are lengthy conversations between people who are really passionate about what may be, for some people, just details. But for us in a particular genre, they are very important.
MVDL Sixty guys here at the studio have [the new controller] and we know they're all happy. So we're not worried about how that thing's going to be received, because we know once people like ourselves pick it up – 60 guys can't be wrong if they're happy.

We still haven't had a chance to hold a DualShock 4. How does it feel in your hands?
HH It feels heavier not in terms of actual weight, but just... quality. It feels [made of] the right materials, the stiffness [of the thumbsticks] is just right, the weight is just right. It feels like an awesome controller that's better suited to be a good extension of yourself. It just feels like quality to me.

After the reveal, some onlookers suggested that PS4 is just a high-end PC, leading them to claim PC is the ultimate winner. What are the meaningful differences?
MVDL What do you say to a troll? You don't feed the trolls – that'll make them grow. The fact that the best pieces of hardware are also devised from, or optimised versions of, the stuff we find in PCs doesn't make it any less a console. A PC is a number of parts that also [have] bridges in-between, where there are inefficiencies that may [come in if they're not] exactly the right match. We've got the right amount of memory, video card; everything's balanced out. It was a very conscious effort to make sure that – with the speed of the memory, the amount of compute units, the speed of the hard drive – there would not be any bottlenecks. I think it was for more than a year that we knew the main ingredients and there was just discussion after discussion trying to find a bottleneck. Take a look at this design; try to find the bottleneck.

Cerny stressed the ease of PS4's development environment. Have you found this to be the case?
MVDL I think it was proudly proclaimed onstage because so much effort has gone into making it easy to develop for. From the earliest dev kits that we got, we got a working tool chain, debuggers, compilers – everything just worked from day one. We were all positively surprised that the plan came together so well. You've got an eight-core CPU. We multithreaded all of our code. The [demo] running onstage used all of the cores at the same time.
HH That demo was running on a version of the dev kit that we received exactly a week before we were onstage, which I think is a good practical indication of how easy it's been.

Guerrilla is introducing a powerful new enemy for *Shadow Fall*. As a so-called Shadow Marshall (part soldier, part spy), you will be well equipped to confront this threat





FUEL INJECTED

How Evolution Studios helped steer the design of PS4's new controller

With precision controls being such a foundational requirement of the racing genre, it's not surprising to learn that Evolution Studios, currently preparing *Driveclub* for PS4's launch, was an integral part of the DualShock's overhaul. It got involved in the process early and a series of controller prototypes began circulating through the office. Tech director **Scott Kirkland** recalls them looking like something off Batman's utility belt. We talk to him and game director Matt Southern in more depth about the prototyping phase, why the *Driveclub* idea took a backseat for so many years, the ambitions to push the game beyond simulation and arcade racing, and using PS4's increased horsepower.





From top: Matt Southern, game director, and Scott Kirkland, technical director

Were there any concerns about moving away from the arcade-style feel of *MotorStorm* and into the simulation realm that Polyphony's *Gran Turismo* series has traditionally occupied?

Matt Southern Sony chose to acquire two firstparty racing studios, one a long time after the other. I can only speak on behalf of one of them: us. We've not had any resistance or issues in terms of developing this as a concept on its own. I basically issued a challenge to the team, which was to say that time and again you'll see articles online suggesting a racing landscape with simulation at one end and arcade at the other. You can maybe add a vertical axis with singleplayer and multiplayer. I told the team we should see that as a last-gen delineation. There are new spaces to occupy that transcend those old definitions and that move us away from all other racers, [spaces] that try to create a new kind of experience that's accessible, fun and social, but is nevertheless breathtaking to look at and sophisticated and deep at the same time as it's accessible.

You mentioned that *Driveclub* has been an idea at Evolution for nearly a decade. Why sit on it up till now?

MS There were levels of detail and accuracy we wanted to achieve with *Driveclub*, and it felt like we should actually wait a little longer for the technology to allow us to build it. I'm not claiming a huge level of prescience here, but [when the *Driveclub* idea first emerged], social meant something else; it meant websites. And we looked at all kinds of things, we looked at personal ads on the Internet. Dare I say it, there are even mock-ups [for *Driveclub*] that look like dating sites. This game has always been about social clubs, and you look at what Facebook says about the phenomenon of social networks. That's what *Driveclub* has always been about, so now is the time for connected group racing.





How do the enhanced technical specifications of PS4's hardware push what you're able to achieve with *Driveclub*?

Scott Kirkland The CPU part of things, having that asymmetrical architecture, that made it really easy for us to gain great performance from the outset. The Play-Go initiative, which Mark Cerny spoke about, those are discussions we've been heavily involved in. Combined with the Blu-ray disc for physical delivery, the hard drive is going to allow us to deliver awesome experiences to players in a fraction of the load times and download times that players experienced on PS3 and [360]. So we're really excited about that. We think it'll be a real differentiator. With it being a very contemporary GPU core, [there's] a whole bunch of new graphics features probably familiar to PC developers, but we've spent a lot of time in PS3 land, so we had to play catch-up on some of those great things like texture varieties, hardware instancing, volume textures, tessellation, texture compression. They're all really cool features that we're leveraging in all sorts of interesting ways.

> "It's scary how long we've been involved – we've been secretive about it for so long"

What kind of input did you have on the DualShock 4 controller?

SK The control side of things has always been a really important thing for racing games, so we made sure that we got involved in the controller discussion very early on. I think this goes back to Christmas 2011. We started working with the guys in Japan on what became the DualShock 4. We were instrumental in securing the specific gyro components that [will] go in the DualShock 4; we had prototypes that demonstrated that the really high frequency gyros were the ones that allowed us to chuck the controller around like a steering wheel, and the ones that they were considering [meant] you could get a fair degree of lag and have to rely on accelerometers to compensate for that. So we put

a very compelling case forward to the guys in Japan, they listened and they're the components that are in the DualShock 4. We did a lot of work with the analogue sticks on the controller, too. We did a prototype using *MotorStorm RC* that allows you to exploit the reduced deadzone size on the controller and the more accurate sticks. It's scary how long we've been involved in this – we've been secretive about it for so long.

MS Shuhei Yoshida taking over [leadership of Worldwide Studios] has been one of the most significant changes, really. We did [these feedback loops] with the Move controllers, we did it with PS Vita. In many ways, they were the proving grounds for this [PS4] collaboration. And, you know, it's cool enough to be asked to make a launch game, but to be asked to define a platform itself – and the DualShock was almost a separate project in itself. No matter how long I've been here, I sometimes pinch myself that this is what I do for a living. That I'm on weekly calls with guys in Japan, with Guerrilla, with Media Molecule, while we're all playing with often the most bizarre prototypes that arrive in the post, using the engines of each different studio, discussing what works and what doesn't, allowing that to inform and shape titles that we're working on… It's been just awesome.

For fans of the racing genre reading this, you probably ought to tease the triggers.

SK The triggers is another area where there's been a huge amount of development. There's been a great back-and-forth between the likes of ourselves and some of the firstperson shooter guys at Guerrilla. They wanted specific things out of the triggers and, from a racing game perspective, we wanted lots of subtlety of control and to have really analogue brakes and acceleration, and so in some cases we had to reach a little bit of a compromise on that. But the controller sits on the desk beautifully, it doesn't accidentally press the triggers, [and] they've got really nice resistance to them.



Matt Southern introduces the world to Evolution's PS4 launch racing title *Driveclub*, explaining how it will use the deep social features of the hardware



Despite the high-fidelity visuals the team is going for, Southern insists that the game isn't intended to be a pure simulation but a new breed altogether

Could you describe some of these DualShock 4 prototypes in more detail for us?

MS Picture something that is quite clearly a DualShock, but has a four-inch circuit board sticking out of it and cables everywhere, delivering the functionality but not quite the form factor. [Laughs]

SK Well, I remember the very early prototypes: they looked like something that Bruce Wayne would carry. It was very industrial in design, plastic, [and] there were things that would come off. I remember seeing paperwork for the import and export prototype, and you know all of them were handmade and insanely expensive and we felt privileged to be getting these samples. In hindsight, we should have taken snaps of this stuff. It would make for an awesome book one day. Unfortunately, some of them did sustain a few battle injuries along the way. [Laughs] We felt terrible about that.

MS I think I broke a few. I became known for it. Stress-testing, I guess we'd call it. [Laughs]



RING LEADER

Meet Shuhei Yoshida, who helped SCEI help itself

On this Friday evening, Shuhei Yoshida is sitting in his office on the 16th floor of Sony's corporate headquarters in Shinagawa, Tokyo. The office working environment changed dramatically when the company relocated from Aoyama, Tokyo, to this building a couple of years ago. The 1,000 or so employees of SCEI, which has led PS4's development, were spread across 17 floors in the old building, but are now crammed into just two, with roughly 500 to a floor. Each room feels as big as a football field, with no high partitions, and you can see from end to end.

Yoshida doesn't mind the layout feeling crammed. He found it a chore to take the stairs and elevators between all those floors in the old building anyway. The new setup is more efficient – he can walk the floor and have quick chats with numerous different people. The new office also gives SCEI better access to other parts of the company. "We are very popular here," says Yoshida proudly. "Many different Sony groups and people want to work with us, so that's great. It helps with collaboration." And nothing pleases Shuhei Yoshida more than collaboration. For him, it's at the heart of the whole PS4 project.

Can you trace PS4 back to the beginning? Did one event set the whole process in motion?
As soon as we launch a platform, we have small number of tech people move on to planning for the next. As soon as the PS3 launched in 2006, I'm sure some parts of the company, especially those hardware people who work in R&D and the semiconductor [area], must have started the R&D effort. And 2008, as Mark [Cerny] mentioned at the New York event, was the time when the initial project was formed, not by just the R&D people but including different parts of the larger, more cross-sectional team. PS Vita was a shorter project compared to PS4, but Mark and Worldwide Studios were involved in both projects, and we worked on both projects simultaneously.



Shuhei Yoshida, president of Worldwide Studios, helped connect the SCEI hardware division with Sony's vast network of firstparty studios

The first PS4 game the world laid eyes on was Cerny's cartoonish *Knack*, which raised a lot of eyebrows. Was this a conscious decision to convey that PS4 isn't simply about hardware specs and photorealism?
Yeah, it was pretty intentional. Mark's idea was like, "What about a *Crash Bandicoot* for PS4?" When he suggested the concept of *Knack*, we were like, "Yeah, we hate to see all the PS4 games being FPS or action-adventure or very photorealistic" – you know, big-budget blockbuster games. We know that people like these games, but these are not the only kinds of games that people can have fun with.

People who watched PS4's reveal event might be tempted to assume that Japan played a less pivotal role in the development of this new console than westerners. Can you talk about the Japanese contribution to this effort?
In terms of the number of people who worked on developing PS4, both hardware and system software were predominantly Japanese. When we presented, we looked for the people who best represent the [points] that we wanted to make, so we chose Mark, and David Perry in the network services side. It could actually have looked like PS4 was developed from a US standpoint and that was not the case, though it was a collaboration between [Japan] and our people based in the US. We have a larger pool of engineering resources in the US, and also some in Europe, in addition to the large technical resources that we always have had in Tokyo. The final additions [to PS4 hardware] were made in Tokyo as well by Andy [House, CEO of SCE] and [Masayasu] Ito, head of the PlayStation console. As the lead system architect, Mark reported to those two.

The DualShock 4 controller seems like a considerable shift beyond

its predecessors. Why such a drastic update this time?
This is as a result of the new process we developed with SCEI. Basically, the PS Vita went through the same process before the actual PS4. So because PS Vita was targeted to launch in 2011, and because a portable console is like designing a controller itself, we went through many, many iterations of PS Vita. So we just continued on the same process. When we started designing the PS4, the people at SCEI were already very familiar with the vocal, creative people in our different [firstparty] studios. So in the process for designing PS4, the discussions with SCEI hardware engineers and the Worldwide Studio game designers and some of the tech people were pretty much similar to [those that happened in Vita development]. So there were suggestions for improvement for DualShock 3 and some completely new ideas came from different groups, such as adding touch, as we all saw the advancement of gaming on smart devices. So that was more a game design side idea. And the adding of the light bar, I think, came from Rich Marks' group, who helped develop PlayStation Move.

Does the light bar on the DualShock 4 encroach on the Move's featureset?
The light bar doesn't actually require the camera to function. It's just a different way of identifying the player. In terms of using the LED [as in the DualShock 3, with] numbers like 1, 2, 3 and 4, it looked a bit odd. The SCEI people wanted some smarter way of doing it, and the use of a full-colour LED came up. And, of course, as Rich's teams pointed out, other than the depth that required the use of PS Move, identifying the precise 2D location of the player can be [done] by camera if we put the LED bar on the controller.

So it has a dual – or it could be a triple – role, because game designers could use it for some effect. Like when [players are] losing HP, the colour could change from green to red. Like in the *Killzone* demo, if you were watching Steven playing, [that game] has that function already. People were watching the main screen, but Steven was facing the audience, showing how the light bar colour changes as he was hit by the enemy; as he lost hit points, the colour was changing from green to red. And when he used the health replenishment, it went back to green.

At the reveal event, PS4 was positioned as being all about games. Does this mean other services – photos, music, and so on – will be less prominent on the console's dashboard?
We know that people like these functions, such as Netflix, and use them a lot. And especially for those people who are not the person who purchased these consoles – like family members – they tend to use these non-game functions. So it's not like we are no longer going to do these functions, but especially for the announcement event, we wanted to show how the game experiences will change with PS4, because that's the biggest focus for us. Once that communication [to the public] is achieved, then probably later this year we'll talk more about what these non-game functions [are] that we are trying to bring to PS4 as well. ■



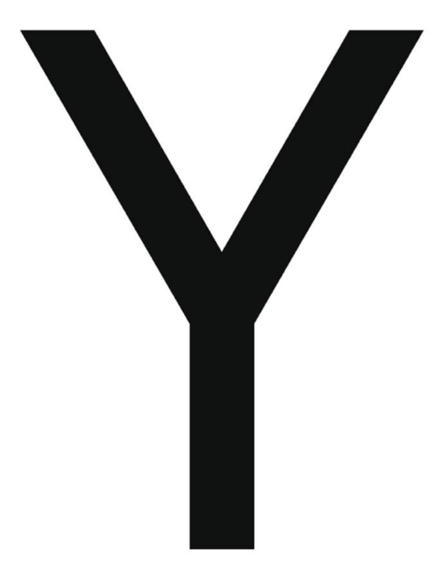
According to Denny, the DualShock 4 controller was "as important an issue and talking point with [firstparty devs]" as PS4's architecture



loaded



There's a debate raging over what it means to be a game. Let's examine the terms of warfare



ou probably play videogames. In fact, you're likely to be deeply familiar with the form. But are you prepared to attempt a working definition of the term? You might even make them, but can you describe them?

When **Sid Meier** described a game as "a series of interesting decisions", he wasn't the first or last to attempt to linguistically pin down this slippery concept. His definition makes workable sense, assuming you arrive at the table with a suitably elastic understanding of the words 'interesting' and 'decision'. Meier's definition certainly captures the experience of playing *SimCity*, or even *The Walking Dead*, but does something like *Super Hexagon* really contain a series of choices? It's a game with one decision – to rotate the cursor clockwise or anticlockwise – repeated ad infinitum, and the interesting part of the game is not making the decision but trying to successfully carry it out. In a sense, *Super Hexagon* bypasses decision making altogether and operates on a reflexive level below choice. You can tuck Terry Cavanagh's game under the edges of Meier's broad umbrella if you so wish, but it's emblematic of a whole school of game design for which the 'series of interesting decisions' label doesn't quite fit.

Meier's definition is enduringly popular, but it's far from the only attempt to define what makes a game. It is, however, one of the few attempts to distil games to their essence that entirely avoids using the word 'rules'. In a keynote speech presented to the Level Up conference in Utrecht in 2003, Jesper Juul proposed a definition of 'game' that, frankly, is a bit exhausting, composed as it is of six discrete criteria. First on the list, however, was that games have rules.

For a less academic example of this philosophy put into practice we can turn to independent designer **Anna Anthropy**, whose book Rise Of The Videogame Zinesters contains within its opening pages the following definition: "a game conveys what it's like to experience [its] subject as a system of rules". Now this comes with a caveat, in that Anthropy is talking about games as an artform specifically, but it's interesting to note how well a game like *Super Hexagon* fits the "system of rules" part of the definition. It's rules are so transparently clear – if the cursor touches anything, you've failed – that they make "avoid missing ball for high score" seem positively convoluted.

One man who's spent more time than he'd probably have liked in recent months pondering the definition of a game is **Ed Key**, whose beautiful, meditative *Proteus* has inspired precisely the kind of frothing, rabid response you wouldn't have expected in relation to a title about going for a walk around an impressionistic island. The most popular thread on the game's Steam forum is, at the time of writing, "Buyer beware: This is not a game!" the author of which sadly fails to provide their own definition of the term.

"I think this has focused my mind on some things," admits Key. "I think there's a certain aspect of the word 'game' linked to the word 'gamer' – the Steam audience – and I get the feeling that there's a more conservative trend, post-achievements and all that stuff, where people want validation.

"Something I've realised about *Proteus* is that, well, it doesn't tell you what to do. It's not even particularly clear if there's an ending to it. I think that doesn't sit well with some people. They want the classic clichéd *Call Of Duty* thing, where you're following a guy with an arrow and you've got to make the numbers go up. These conventions make people more comfortable, knowing what they're supposed to be doing."



Sid Meier, founder, Firaxis

Immersion's not a particularly controversial word in itself, but it's worth considering what you really mean when you use this term in relation to games. The Astronauts' Adrian Chimielarz argues that is used in place of a number of other, more accurate terms. "Immersion is basically when you forget one reality, the real world, and you find yourself in another reality," he explains. "You can get very immersed in a movie or a book; you're very immersed in that world. It's different to a sense of presence, which is unique to games, where you feel that you are physically somewhere else." While we can't see it catching on (it's three words long as opposed to one, after all) 'sense of presence' is still useful and distinct when contrasted with 'immersion', letting you articulate why both *Skyrim* and a novel will fully absorb your attention, but only one will you make you feel like you are standing upon a chilly mountainside. Both are distinct from 'engagement', Chmielarz argues, which is the active participation of a person who happens to be immersed in a game.



Proteus **has been lambasted for not being a game, yet it's clear there's no real consensus about what that means**

Proteus's detractors, then, seem to feel that the game fails to provide a system of rules and the associated clearly defined failure and success states that will guide and measure their playing of it. It's telling that the author of the Steam thread cites "no objectives" as one of his major complaints.



Ed Key, indie developer

Of course, *Proteus* isn't the first title to spark this debate. Dan Pinchbeck's *Dear Esther* caused a flurry of discussion last year, while only a few months ago Tomorrow Corporation's *Little Inferno* frustrated fans of its creators' work by being noticeably less 'gamey' than *World Of Goo*. But what exactly is the problem here? All these experiences have their advocates, yet seem to attract a throng of bitterly disappointed players who feel they've been misled as to the nature of the work they were paying for. In short, are developers like Key and Pinchbeck misusing language in their attempts to describe and sell their work, or is it language failing both developers and players?






Dan Pinchbeck, creative director, thechineseroom

"There's no consensus of any sort on what 'game' means," argues **Adrian Chmielarz**, ex-People Can Fly creative director and a co-founder of indie studio The Astronauts. "There are people who will give you a definition as understood like 15, 20 years ago: 'There has to be a winner, a loser…' and so on. It started changing with Sid Meier's definition. [That helped me] start looking at the definition of 'game' from a slightly different perspective."

The problem with 'game' is that it's used by both traditional designers and those making experimental projects. Does it follow that arguments are inevitable as long as *Gears Of War* and *Proteus* go by the same moniker?

"'Film' meant the material: a roll of film. But now, when we say 'film', we mean the movie. So the same thing can easily happen to 'game'"

"You know, words change their meaning," responds Chmielarz. "'Film' meant the material: a roll of film. But now, when we say 'film', we mean the movie. So the same thing can easily happen to 'videogame' or 'game'. When we say 'game', we can mean *Doom* or any old-school game where there is a clear winner, a clear ending, or you die. Or we can mean any form of interactive experience that you enjoy. I mean, from my friends I've heard all kinds of proposals, like: 'Let's stop calling them games, let's call them ludos.' This is just one of the proposals. Ultimately, I think we're stuck with game; we're going to be calling them 'game', we'll just mean more things by it. We're not slaves to the language; language should be a slave to us."

The process of words changing their meaning over time – termed semantic shift, since we're being precise – probably will result in 'game' becoming generally perceived as a much broader term. There are precedents, after all. Chmielarz's example of 'film' is a strong one, but Key provides a second example. "'Comics' is an interesting one," he argues. "They were originally called comics because they were


Adrian Chmielarz, co-founder, The Astronauts

Do you **complete** an album? **Beat** one? You finish them perhaps, but not with the level of finality that the use of the word within gaming culture would imply. 'Beat' in particular implies an adversarial relationship that seems outdated in an era of adaptive difficulty and regenerating health. These days, games want you to finish them. "'Beat' is a funny one," chuckles Ed Key. "I got an email from someone recently saying he beat *Proteus* three times. He really liked the game and didn't think he was going to like it, but that really amused me." And *Proteus*, of course, offers a procedural world. "You can play through *Proteus*, finish it maybe, but you're very unlikely to see everything in one playthrough. If someone says they've finished it, it means something different to me than it means to them… I mean they mean 'I'm finished for me…' I'm totally fine with that. But something I was hoping for was for it to be something [that] sort of nags at you a bit – that maybe you didn't see everything, and you'll play through it again and… see something that you didn't see before."





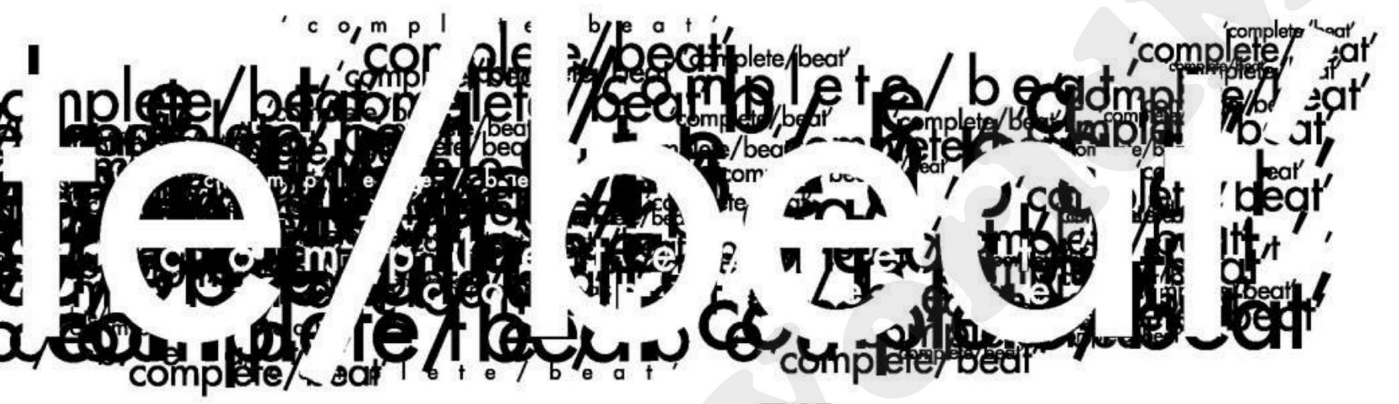
What do you call it in *GTA* when you ignore the challenges and just drive? Chmielarz wouldn't call it gameplay

meant to be funny, but then people started doing different things with the form. But they're still called comics." The word 'comic' never lost its association with humour, of course, but nowadays no one hears the phrase 'comic book' and presumes that the contents are meant to be funny.

Crucially, however, semantic shift is a hard process to control. In politics, words can and have been reclaimed: the gay rights movement successfully wrested back 'queer', for instance. But even then the process isn't always a success, and it's unlikely that an attempt to hurry along the semantic shift of the word 'game' would muster a similar groundswell of impassioned support (and the associated catchy chants) that helped shift queer's meaning. For similar reasons, attempts to rename what we currently consider to be games or popularise alternate terms will struggle, not least because everyone would have to agree on what they're replacing 'game' with first. Chmielarz, for instance, is comfortable with 'experience' to define interactive works devoid of overt rules and goals. But Key is not: "I can see where people are coming from with that, and why people say *Proteus* is an 'experiential' game," he acknowledges, "but it seems an empty word." Without a consensus, no one is going to be able to force a semantic shift.

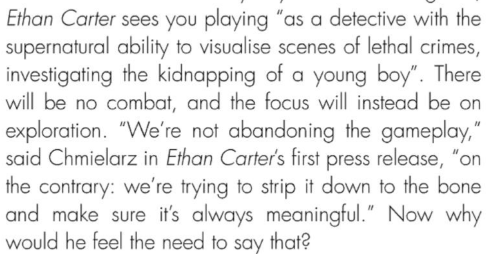
Besides, people like **Ian Bogost**, an academic at The Georgia Institute Of Technology and a game designer, don't see the point of alternatives. "Is 'movie' a stupid term?" he argues. "Sure, but we use it anyway. Words connote, but mostly they denote. Corn is corn. Toasters are toasters. It's not a big deal." In the meantime, Bogost's personal definition of game, "a thing that participates in the conversation about what a game is" is intentionally vague.

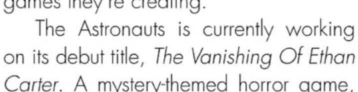
The comic book industry did, however, manage to popularise 'graphic novel' as an alternative to 'comic' when it was going through a crisis of definition. 'Graphic novel' provided a useful means of presenting works such as Art Spiegelman's Maus to the outside world, free from associations of fortnightly superhero stories. Tellingly, however, the distinction between a graphic novel and a comic book remains fuzzy, and plenty of authors still dismiss the term as needlessly pretentious. Gaming's issue with labels is less about external perception, anyway, and more about settling upon an agreed upon definition of what a 'game' is in the first place.



But even if we trust that issue to resolve itself in time and wait for the word 'game' to be hollowed out until it brings with it no immediate associations of rules, winners, losers, goals, objectives and fail states, that doesn't mean the wider language of gaming is ready to accommodate the expanding nature of the experiences that developers are providing. Terms such as 'mechanic' and 'system' refer to the content of games in language that makes their machine code origins overt. Words such as 'casual' and 'hardcore' seek to define two sides of an increasingly blurred divide. Meanwhile, complimentary terms such as 'immersive' and 'artistic' are used frequently, but is there any consensus on what people mean by them?

These questions are more important than they might seem, especially if you're a proponent of linguistic relativity, the idea that language can shape thoughts rather than merely express them. If that's true (and current academic consensus is that it is at least partially so) then the words that designers and developers use to think about games will, to some extent, shape the way they think about the games they're creating.





Maus was labelled a 'graphic novel', as opposed to a 'comic'

The Astronauts is currently working on its debut title, *The Vanishing Of Ethan Carter*. A mystery-themed horror game, *Ethan Carter* sees you playing "as a detective with the supernatural ability to visualise scenes of lethal crimes, investigating the kidnapping of a young boy". There will be no combat, and the focus will instead be on exploration. "We're not abandoning the gameplay," said Chmielarz in *Ethan Carter*'s first press release, "on the contrary: we're trying to strip it down to the bone and make sure it's always meaningful." Now why would he feel the need to say that?

In November, Chmielarz posted an entry on The Astronaut's blog titled Why We Need To Kill Gameplay To Make Better Games, and naturally found himself embroiled in a series of comment thread and forum arguments as a result. Lurking a few paragraphs beneath the provocative title, however, was Chmielarz's fairly modest partial definition of gameplay: "something that a challenge is a crucial part of". With this in mind, we can see that what The Astronauts really wants to remove in *Ethan Carter* are skill-based interactions with fail states. For Chmielarz, it's all about being in a world.



Ian Bogost, game designer



The Vanishing Of Ethan Carter **isn't based on systematic challenges**

"I think that games which have an old-school definition of gameplay – *Tetris* or *Bejewelled* or *Angry Birds* – they're all great and I play a lot of those," acknowledges Chmielarz. "But the thing that excites me is actually a simulation of another world, where you don't really have endings that are better than one another, you just have alternatives, or you can just be in that world... Like in *Skyrim*, you can just be in *Skyrim*, just hanging around. Or the really famous one is *GTA*, just driving a car in *GTA*, [and] just cruising around listening to the radio. That's just an experience. Is that 'gameplay'?"

Either way, Chmielarz's definition of gameplay would clearly imply that games such as *Proteus* and *Dear Esther*, as well as more overtly experimental (and mechanically complex) titles such as Tale Of Tales' *Bientôt L'été*, don't actually contain any. These games certainly aren't devoid of interactions, however. They even contain loops that are arguably game mechanics (movement triggers sound in both *Proteus* and *Dear Esther* – the island's environmental noises in the former and scraps of narration in the latter). Yet they are devoid of challenge, or any impediments to player immersion. To phrase this more controversially: they're not very hardcore.

'Casual' and 'hardcore' are semantic battlefields, keenly contested by parties invariably using them to propagate gaming ideals. To many gamers, 'hardcore' is a badge of honour, used to differentiate themselves from 'casuals', whose knowledge of gaming is shallow, whose tastes are unsophisticated and whose skills are lacking. Conversely, game companies have been mistrustful of 'hardcore' for some time, perhaps concerned that its associations with passionate fanboyism and high skill levels are off-putting to players who don't define themselves along such polarised lines. Hence the coinage 'core gamers', a phrase seemingly calculated to appeal to the self-identifying hardcore while avoiding cutting

anyone out. When **Satoru Iwata** announced that the Wii U was aimed at core gamers, he supplied the following definition to put it in context: "someone who has a much wider range of interests, someone who enthusiastically plays many types of games".

Naturally, Chmielarz has his own definition."I've started to use 'casual' and 'hardcore' in a different way," he explains. "Normally, when you say 'hardcore', you mean a gamer who plays a lot. And when you say 'casual', you mean a gamer who plays every now and then. But to me, 'hardcore' means a gamer who is able to put up with a lot of shit in order to play a game and 'casual' is a person who can't be bothered if the game isn't something that they can consume easily. That's my personal definition, and that's how I'm approaching the design of *Ethan Carter*." It's certainly a useful working definition, but is he prepared to hop online and start promoting *Ethan Carter* as a casual game? "Fuck no!" he exclaims.

And this, perhaps, is the major lexical quagmire currently entrapping games and the people designing them. The language used by designers of experimental and, yes, experiential games seeking to leave overt challenge and other traditional design principles behind – words like 'casual', 'easy', and 'accessible' – is currently being shared with the language used by manufacturers of the sort of throwaway experience that many 'hardcore' gamers abhor, associating the phrases with the shallow inanities of Facebook games or the slight content of Kinect titles. Players can tell the difference between *Proteus* and *FarmVille*, we're sure, but it's the shared vocabulary inviting the comparison in the first place. In The Astronauts' case, meanwhile, Chmielarz is forced to qualify and define his terms even as he's using them.

Bogost argues that the point is moot, stating that "casual means everyone. It was never a good term, but now it means everyone who plays *Solitaire* or *Minesweeper* or *Angry Birds* or *Words With Friends*. Who doesn't do that? Nobody. Casual is everyone." But that statement, while true, doesn't change the fact that casual is a loaded term.

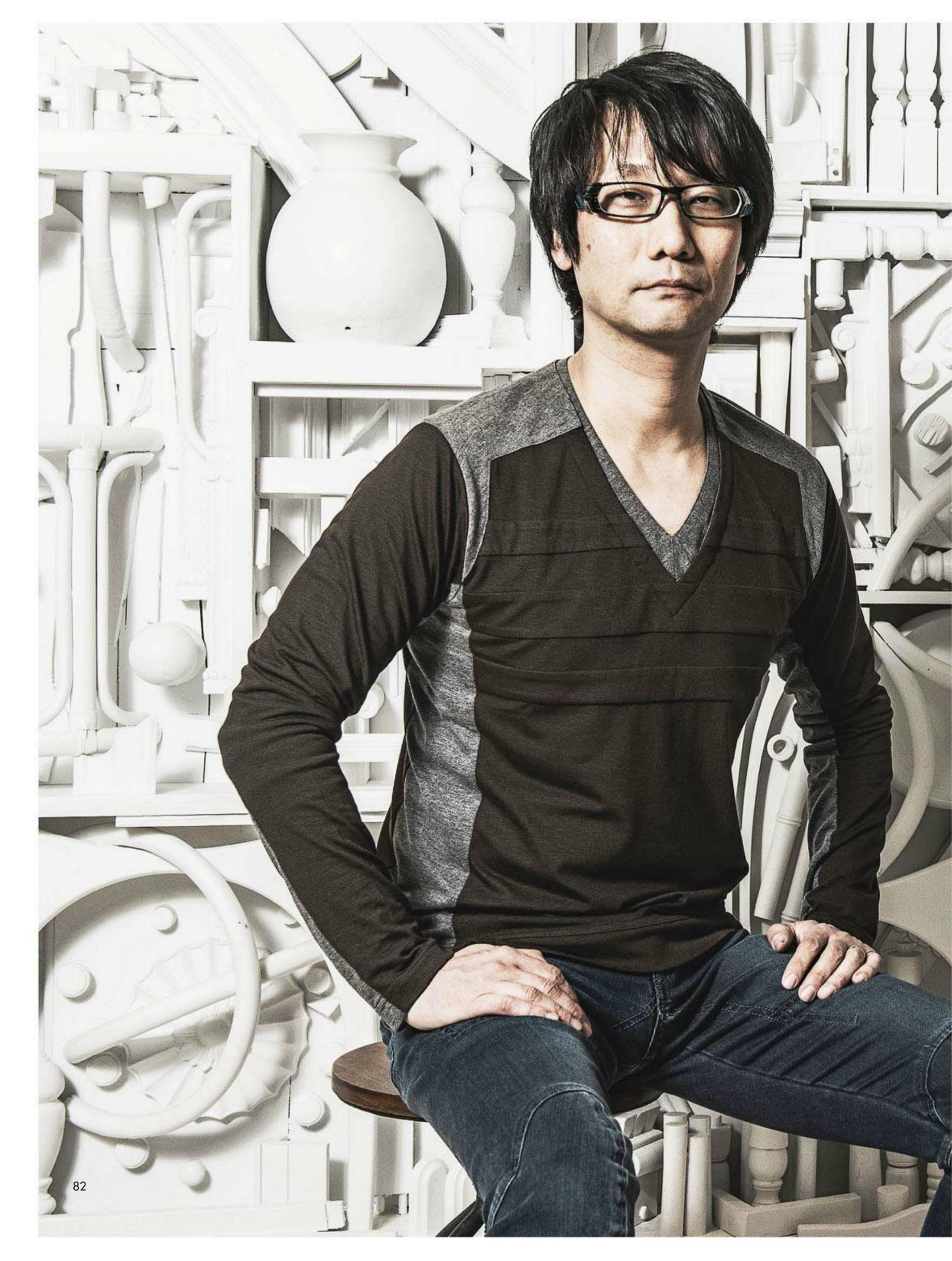
As with the definition of 'game', these arguments will resolve themselves in time. New coinages will take on, or meanings will shift to the point where people are able to quibble about the content of the games rather than fighting over the phrases used to describe them. Because that's what these disputes over definitions are really signify, after all. When an angry Internet commentator says *Proteus* "isn't a game", what they're really saying is that they don't want games to be like *Proteus*. It's a debate worth having, perhaps. But first we must define our terms. ■



Art is, of course, the big one. People will argue indefinitely as to whether or not videogames are art. But rarely can they agree on what the term even means, either talking around the concept pointlessly or producing bespoke definitions to support their own point. Here's Chmielarz's take, for instance: "to me, art is basically when I experience something and it gives me a revelation". It's a definition that relies on the observer to decide for themselves, in other words. It's very different to that of Brian Moriarty, who famously defended film critic Roger Ebert's dismissal of games into the 'not art' pile by providing two artistic categories, 'sublime art' and 'kitsch art'. "Sublime art is fragile," he argued, "there's nothing superfluous or out place." *Ridiculous Fishing* co-creator **Zach Gage** would side with Chmielarz, telling us he's only able to define art in terms of his own response. "The feeling I get from art is bordering on religious reverence," he said. "The idea that something you're looking at is connecting to so many parts of you and so many parts of the world that you can't even begin to understand what it is." Such indecision around the term rather invites the question – if no one can agree on a definition of what art is, then what on Earth are they arguing about in the first place?

"Now casual means everyone who plays Solitaire or Minesweeper or Angry Birds or Words With Friends. Who doesn't do that?"







AN AUDIENCE WITH...

HIDEO KOJIMA

Kojima on the future of Metal Gear, the mystery of The Phantom Pain and hitting 50

"I think those things will in Ground Zeroes – what's and what will happen in

Following our interview last issue with **Hideo Kojima** on PlayStation 4 and an episodic model for development, it may seem strange to encounter him in these pages again. However, there's a lot more to this enigmatic creator than prognostication, and we were eager to find out more about the man behind one of gaming's best-loved series. By the time you read this, *Metal Gear Solid*'s future will have been made far clearer at the Game Developer Conference in San Francisco. While there, Kojima's expected to not just showcase Fox Engine's capabilities via a fresh tech demo of *Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes*, but also offer up one or two surprises as well. We met with him while he was on a promotional tour for *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*, and he soon hinted that his GDC date would be more significant than we first anticipated, even if he couldn't explain in what way. So instead, we discussed his thoughts on making the *MGS* movie, platform exclusives, turning 50 and creating for the people he loves.





CV

Hideo Kojima joined Konami's MSX division as a designer and planner in 1986. Konami rejected his first game, *Lost World*, but he was asked to take over the *Metal Gear* project. The series has sold over 30 million copies to date. Now Kojima is head of Kojima Productions, working on multiple titles and directing the development of its Fox Engine tech.

What have been the highlights of your European press tour for *Rising*?

We had an event at the Grand Palais, Paris, where they had prepared this police car that was cut into pieces very cleanly. It was amazing, the way that it was cut – it just floored me. That car was actually a donation; we put it up on eBay and had a fundraising auction. All the proceeds from that were donated to worthy causes. Paris was our first stop on the tour, so I was thinking, 'Oh, this is going to be amazing. We'll go to Madrid, we'll go to Italy and Spain, and maybe we'll see a helicopter cut up, or trains, maybe a London bus.' I was really excited; my hopes were very high.

One of *Rising*'s themes is that of cutting. What would you like to cut out of your own life?

Tough question; maybe Konami. [Laughs] I'm turning 50 this year, and while I love game development, it's a time in my life where I'd like to explore other things. I love games, but I don't necessarily like the management of the business aspect of working for a company. There are many things I'd like to do: for example, maybe take a year off and write a novel. I've also had offers to work on various movies and make movies, so those are things that I'd love to explore at some point. If I could, I think it would be a great change in my life.

Who is the most interesting character you've met during the production of the *Metal Gear Solid* movie, and what's your impression of Hollywood?

Obviously, I can't speak too much about the movie because I'm under various [non-disclosure agreements], but if I had to talk about my ideas for, say, characters and casting, there are some names I'd like to raise… I don't want someone who has too much background in making game movies. I want to find someone fresh who can grow into this movie [playing Snake] as their first role. I'm working with the producer, Avi Arad, and he's come to me with various offers, saying that there are a lot of Hollywood actors who want to be Snake in the movie. But I'm reluctant to find somebody who's a big-name action hero. I don't want somebody who has an established image, but who can grow along with Snake as a fellow human being.

Had there been any temptation to use the movie as a chance to meet people who you admire, such as Ben Affleck, whose films we know you love?

It's still early and I haven't really got to that phase yet, but yes, I will definitely take advantage of that and meet many people. As far as Ben Affleck is concerned, I love him as a director; I think honestly that he would make a great director for the movie, but I don't think as an actor he's suited for Snake. Maybe people might get angry for me saying that. [Laughs]

How have the demands of next-generation development affected your team's approach to making games?

There's no point in us spending time on things that the player will never notice or see. Even when we're doing the 3D capture of actors, we're relying on physical simulations



be reflected in Snake happening right now my future”



in lighting to make up for the lack of detail and be more efficient, rather than going through it fine-tuning every little detail with a brush. There's no point modelling every wrinkle. Of course, this goes against an artist's creative instincts. Even if an object looks real, they want to touch it up and start adding extra details, but we have to change that way of thinking and focus on what's most efficient.

Are you concerned about team sizes and budgets expanding even further for next-gen development, especially since game sales often aren't what they were?
It all depends on your approach to production. If you approach things in the old-fashioned way where characters' hands had no fingers [and] you suddenly add fingers, [then] that means you have to redesign everything, because it has to interact with this new model. Technologically it's now possible to do many more things much more realistically, but that doesn't mean you should automatically do all of these things. You really have to prioritise… Teams that are able to do that will be able to continue without too many changes to team size and budget. If someone's set on making a deep game with a really detailed campaign that's supposed to last 20-30 hours then, yes, inevitably it would take more time to create and you'd probably need a bigger team.

You've talked about episodic content being another way to approach this problem. Will next-gen consoles make that kind of content more viable?
I wouldn't necessarily say next-gen consoles make it easier to create this type of game, but since they're all online and downloads are an integral part [then that] means this type of push makes sense. In the days of the Nintendo Entertainment System, you could put out just about anything and it'd sell. Nowadays, it takes a lot of money to make games. Rather than taking the Hollywood approach and putting $200 million on the line to make a product that may or may not sell, I think you can reduce risk by distributing things online and have people download smaller samples so they can give it a try. If it works, you can continue; if not, you change your strategy.

Historically, you have a close association with Sony. Do you think you'll ever appear at E3 again to announce, for example, that *Metal Gear Solid 5* is exclusive to PS4, or do you think those days are over?
It's a tough question to answer. Obviously, I do like Sony, I respect them and I have a lot of things in common with their way of thinking. I think the future of gaming is with cloud technology and cloud gaming. I love Sony, I have a Sony camera, but I think if you're going to enter that cloud generation then there will be a lot of different devices involved and a lot of different ways to interact with that game world. I don't want to limit it to any one platform, but I'm not going to say I'm not going to participate in the events. This time [for the PlayStation Meeting], I kind of would have liked to participate, but I was here tending to *Rising*'s world tour.

How will the next-generation consoles affect your ability to tell stories?
I think it depends on the people creating the games. For example, *Killzone* looks very traditional; it probably won't change very much. It will probably be similar to what you've seen before. But if the creators are very conscious of all the social aspects, and working that into their method of storytelling, then I think we'll see some very interesting things happen. I think, at the very least, next gen broadens the possibilities of what can be done with storytelling.

You previously said that as long as there was a Snake, he would always reflect a facet of your personality. How does *Ground Zeroes* reflect what you're thinking now?
Ground Zeroes focuses on my present and my future. Of course, with what's happening in my life, I have various problems and burdens that are on my mind, and I think those things go into my own game whenever I develop a new game. I think those things will be reflected in Snake in *Ground Zeroes* – what's happening right now and what will happen in my future.

What have you learned from the feedback to the game?
Honestly, the response to what we've shown so far [the first

His focus may be off family, but expect Kojima's musings on life and ambition to influence the next *Metal Gear* game

trailer] has been very good. At this point in time, I haven't made any changes. We are making an open-world game, and I think there are a lot of people who have doubts about how stealth can be done in the world. People will actually have to see some gameplay and, depending on feedback, maybe I'll adjust things. *Ground Zeroes* is striving to be a completely realistic stealth game, and it's incredibly intense. Everything happens in realtime; there's a day and night cycle.

I've let people outside of the team play it, and after two hours they're just completely exhausted, because they're so stressed out about thinking through every single step. Like if they take too long to get to a certain area and it becomes night, or if they got lost in the mountains and can't see where they're going on the mountain path, but then when the sun comes up there's soldiers everywhere. So they're stressed out by that. It's an incredibly intense experience, the exact opposite of *Rising*.

If you were the director of *The Phantom Pain* [a trailer for which was shown at the Spike Video Game Awards last year with a speculated connection to Kojima Productions] what feedback might you take from that?
I don't know. [Laughs]

Do you believe in leaving a breadcrumb trail of clues in your trailers? Do you find that people read into things that aren't there?
I think it's important to leave hints, but in a sense, it's important to mislead people with hints. If something is too predictable then it's no longer fun. I think that's the problem with many Hollywood sequels. You get exactly what you expect. But I want to make people look forward to a game and then, when they actually play it, have this sort of epiphany, 'Oh, so that's what that was.' It all comes together and clicks in their head. I think it's very important that you leave some discovery for the player.

At the Eurogamer Expo, you talked about your Los Angeles studio working on a version of *Metal Gear Online*. What would be the challenges of creating a new *Metal Gear Online* universe? What sort of gameplay environment would it have to provide?
The original *Metal Gear Online* was received pretty well in Japan, but it was tweaked for Japanese sensibilities: small things such as the camera panning speed or the design of the maps. So, unfortunately, it didn't find too much success outside of Japan. This time we're trying to gain an international perspective, and I'm hoping the LA studio can help with that. There are many games that have plot modes or versus battle modes, but that isn't enough. I'm trying to do something a little different with *MGO*.

You've hailed both cross-platform play and sharing between devices such as tablets and phones as being integral to next-gen development – can you give an example of how this might work?
I can't say too much now, but we're testing a lot of things, capabilities of tablets and whatnot. We're experimenting. Even with the next gen, there [are] so many things that aren't possible regarding platform play. We are laying the groundwork for what we want to accomplish. What we're doing now – for example, with iPad – is fairly limited and there's no way we can reproduce what you're going to see on the next-gen platforms. But a couple of tablet generations down the road, it may come very close.

At E3, you claimed that your next project would touch on themes of love and family. Is that still the case? If so, how's that progressing?
I did say that, and I'm very interested in exploring these themes, but right now what's most pressing is I'm turning 50 years old this year. What's really on my mind is life, and life expectancy. What does life mean, and what can be accomplished in life? I think for a lot of creative individuals there comes a point where that becomes a major concern for them, and you see that in movies. Right now that's a theme I want to explore first.

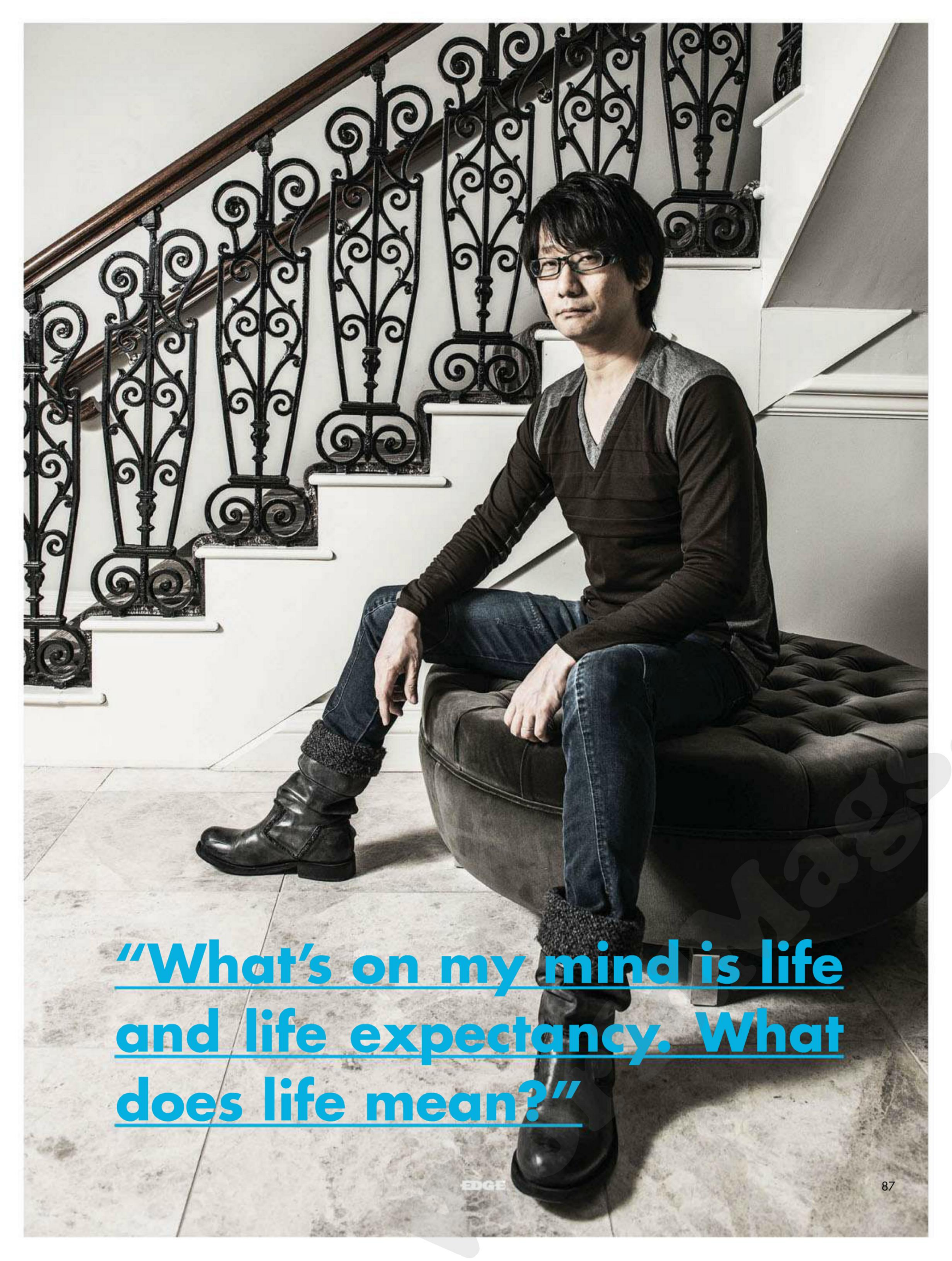
What would you focus your energy on if you were told you would retire within one year?
That would actually be extremely tough, because once I start something, I want to see it through to the end. Right now I'm working on *Ground Zeroes*. I would do just about anything to keep on making the project – I'd sell body parts, whatever I had to do. I want to finish this game. But, after that, if I only had one year left, I think my answer would be different. I think I'd like to stop exploring games and maybe make a movie, or write a book. I would also like to go into space. You know, things like that.

How closely do key moments in the *Metal Gear* series reflect how you've felt? Or have they reflected what you wanted to say to the important people in your life?
[Kojima pauses before continuing in a lowered tone] In the beginning, I would say the answer to that is yes. I had very specific people in mind when I created a game, and I had a message that I wanted to pass along. But now my thought process is changing. It's not a specific set of people or person that I'm trying to send a message to. This has come about from 25 years of creating games, and now I'm travelling around the world, and I've met many fans who I've never seen before in my life. They don't know me, I don't know them, and they're just fanatic. They come, they ask for my autograph, they respect me, and I feel like I'm needed and I'm filling a role for them. I feel like I have an obligation to them. My view of what creativity should be has changed because of that. So it's not necessarily sending a message to people I love, but more in a general sense. ■

GHOST STORY

In the run-up to GDC, Joakim Mogren, the supposed head of Moby Dick Studio, appeared on US internet gaming show GTTV, heavily bandaged, to show a new *Phantom Pain* trailer. If anything, it made it seem even more likely that the game is a new *Metal Gear* title (if 'Joakim' being an anagram of 'Kojima', among many other clues, wasn't enough). Kojima's announcement at GDC seems likely to confirm the reality behind *The Phantom Pain*. Even if the final reveal is fairly predictable, this teaser campaign has been anything but.





"What's on my mind is life and life expectancy. What does life mean?"



REVIEWS. INTERVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of The White Witch PS3
It's a slow burner, but some 45 hours into *Ni No Kuni* we're still oddly entranced by the marriage of Ghibli's artistic gift with Level-5's painting-by-numbers RPG. What it lacks in mechanical grace – we'd give our entire Wizard's Companion for a better block – it makes up for in richness of character and a wealth of things to do. Its heart-warming tale is an antidote for those tainted by the bleakness of endless mainstream FPSes.

Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance 360, PS3
Steel sharpens steel and our skills have grown sharp indeed. What works for *Rising* is transferable to *DMC* and *Bayonetta* as your reactions improve and you grow accustomed to the physics of superhuman combat. After spending time with so many light-footed heroes, it's hard to go back to slower games, but at least there's always *Rising*'s monologues and forced-walk bits to infuriate you on that sixth playthrough.

Diablo III Mac, PC
It's hard to feel proud to play *Diablo III*. In fact, it feels shameful, in the same way it does to helplessly empty a bag of delicious, awful Haribo Tangfastics into your mouth. Especially when we know that the real reason we're playing is that we're too scared to play *StarCraft II* multiplayer. Here's the rub: we even know while we're testing out our new Wave Of Light rune that our *StarCraft II* friends know why we're not playing with them. Please forgive us.



We test games using Sony's LED full-HD 3D Bravia display technology. For details of the entire range, visit www.bit.ly/xgnl3d

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Up-to-the-minute reviews and previews

Saving the best till last. This generation's dying triumphs

The final months of a generation of consoles are frequently its best. Studios firmly grasp a platform's capabilities and they've accumulated years of experience with what works, and what sells on it. And if a game's in an established series, its creators, mindful of their missteps and wanting to go out on a high, embark on it with crystal clear vision.

BioShock Infinite (p90), Irrational's latest fantastical FPS, is set in as remarkable a world as the two games that preceded it, albeit one that's high in the sky instead of deep below the sea. It also feels, by simple virtue of having a living and sane populace, much more alive. If 2007's *BioShock* could be fairly criticised for offloading too much of its secondary narrative to audiologs, perhaps *Infinite* is guilty of doing much the same. But by introducing more open combat and the most richly drawn AI companion since Alyx Vance, *Infinite* genuinely builds on what came before it.



On the other hand, all that collected experience can bog a game down in expectation and conservatism. *God Of War: Ascension* (p102) is even more beautiful to look at than *God Of War 3*, but its campaign seems afraid to come out from its shadow. Kratos' expanded climbing ability isn't quite enough to meaningfully expand on the series' best qualities, and nor is an even greater propensity to put breasts on legendary monsters.

And yet *Ascension* still manages to live up to its name, but only by introducing something new to the series: multiplayer. This mode's furious action is a result of new combat design and a pulled-back camera that makes it less a refinement and more a reinvention. *Infinite*'s intricate finessing is a pleasure to experience, but to see Sony Santa Monica applying invention at the end of a generation is just as welcome.

BioShock Infinite

Publisher 2K
Developer Irrational Games
Format 360, PC (version tested), PS3
Release Out now

BioShock Infinite is a lavish, spectacular game. It's an intelligent one, too, where themes such as the nature of choice, metaphysics and the effects of political isolationism jostle for your attention alongside electrifying giant robots with your genetically altered left hand and then shooting them in the face. That *Infinite* can handle the collision between its philosophical concerns and its dead-end thrills without seeming hopelessly crass or overly portentous testifies to its often touching script, excellent pacing and the kind of unparalleled world building that shows you all of this coexisting cohesively in a golden city in the sky. But it also demonstrates something else: *BioShock*'s mechanical evolution as a firstperson shooter.

Not that you'll notice right away, seeing as *Infinite* deliberately rehashes (and inverts) its predecessor's opening. In the marooning of protagonist Booker DeWitt at a fog-shrouded lighthouse and the familiar violin strains that rise and fall as the resplendent city of Columbia comes into view, *Infinite* establishes a relationship with *BioShock* and Columbia's twin city under the sea. Irrational knows you've been to Rapture and back. It knows you expect a high-concept monoculture, a charismatic leader and a dark reality behind the gleaming facade. It knows you've stalked Big Daddies and will be sizing up Columbia's brass-suited behemoths with a seasoned eye. It knows you're waiting for a twist. And it plays with these expectations even as it delivers what you came for.

It's not so clever as to entirely exonerate itself from accusations of retreading old ground. *Infinite*'s power-granting Vigors don't feel as well woven into Columbia as Rapture's Plasmids, for instance, while the gun- and ammo-dispensing vending machines are more nakedly player-servicing without an objectivist libertarian utopia to provide thematic support. Like Rapture, Columbia indoctrinates its citizens through a familiar mix of cheery propaganda and vaudevillian exhibits. And like Rapture, it tells much of its story via characters who presumably spend a fortune replacing the audiotapes that they carelessly scatter about on their morning walks. DeWitt's journey through the city, meanwhile, takes familiar form. He still travels from one themed, self-contained locale to the next – from piers to factories to poor districts – just not by bathysphere.

There are differences, however. For one, Columbia is alive, its civilian populace a constant presence throughout the game as the city teeters on the brink of war. As well as providing chances for the shooting to cease, these moments let you interact with Columbia's people as well as drink in the exquisite details of this Victorian American take on Heaven, a place that worships the Founding Fathers as angels, treats non-whites like slaves, and where every street comes obligingly bathed in god rays. *Infinite*'s non-action moments allow a more complex story to be told, too. Much of this is through scripted conversations and set-pieces that occasionally go as far as to break your control, but the rest through clues left for you to puzzle over. As before, *Infinite*'s licensed soundtrack blends with Irrational's architecture and art design to fill in the culture of its city, although you might start questioning that culture when you stroll into a bar and hear a jazzy arrangement of Tainted Love.

In a sense, this means the skilful environmental storytelling showcased in the original game – where you would piece together the story of a location by poking around what was left of it – has been downplayed. But in return for this sacrifice, *Infinite* enables you to see an accelerated version of the collapse that happened before we docked in Rapture. Columbia provides less horror and is less powerfully evocative than a watery tomb, but to an extent you might not expect, it's a place you get to see change.

Elizabeth's a technical triumph, the most human-seeming AI companion since Half-Life 2's Alyx Vance

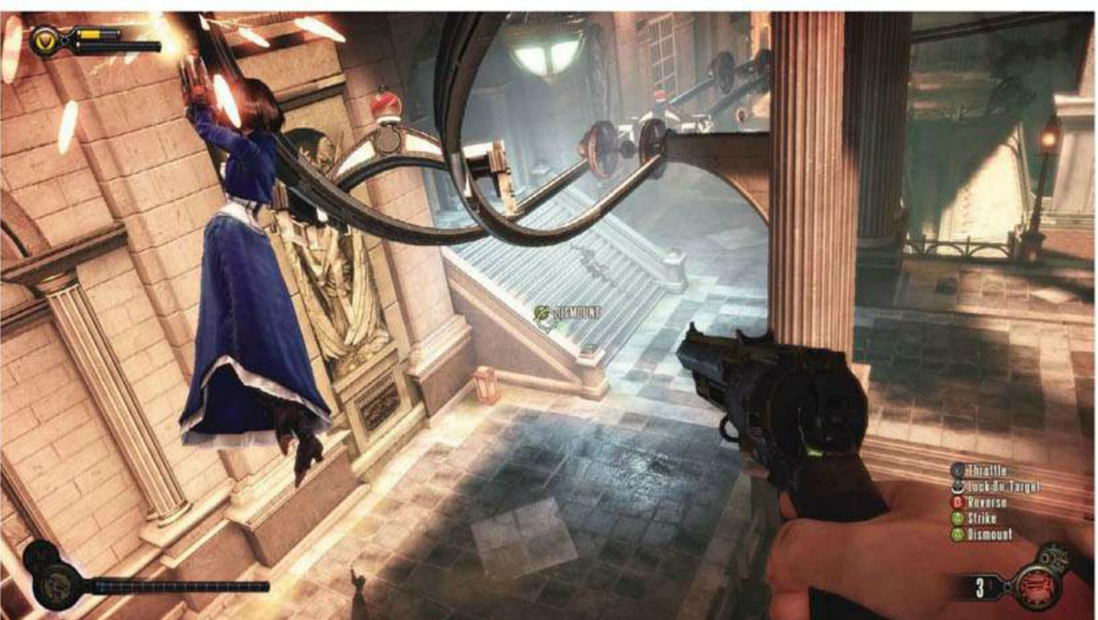


Early on, you'll think you have the city figured out when you meet Elizabeth, the damsel-in-distress locked away in her tower, who just so happens to have the ability to produce tears in space and time. You'll spend much of the game in her company, and she's a technical triumph, the most human-seeming AI companion since *Half-Life 2*'s Alyx Vance. She's always a presence, yet never obstructive, and it's a rare occasion when you catch her acting like a machine. Explore an uninhabited location and she'll do the same, reading over desk work while you rifle through the drawers, providing incidental details or amusing herself by investigating whatever she's found. Even when she can't find something to do, she has a very human way of being idle: sitting down on some upturned rubble, say. She's good company, in short, and you'll miss her during the rare sequences when she's not around.

That said, there are times when all these incidental character details can bump up against Irrational's more overt attempts to make a useful AI companion. At unpredictable moments, she'll toss coins she's scavenged at DeWitt, her canned call for your attention puncturing the quietness of a scene. Her role as the pair's lockbreaker, meanwhile, can sometimes pick at the illusion of her autonomy, since she instantaneously and cheerfully responds to DeWitt's beck and call. This responsiveness makes far more sense on the battlefield, where she can pull aid (cover, mechanised allies or guns) through tears at the press of a button, and where the

ABOVE Shock Jockey – *Infinite*'s equivalent of Electro Bolt – can be used to set multiple traps. These in turn provide dangerously arcing lines of electricity between one another, which are excellent to lure larger enemies towards.

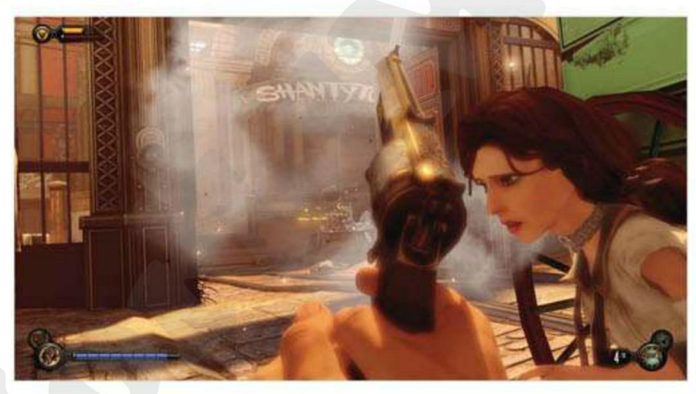
LEFT DeWitt's not the only one who can use Columbia's Sky-Line. Elizabeth will use the rails of her own accord, and enemies will follow DeWitt if he tries to retreat



BELOW Elizabeth is never in danger during battle, and enemies ignore her. Usually, she does a good job of staying out of your sightline, too, generally keeping behind DeWitt and calling for his attention when she has items to pass on



ABOVE Whereas Rapture's inhabitants were driven mad by the Plasmids they spliced their genes with, Columbia's are saner. Once they're covered in armour and flinging fire at you, it's hard to tell the difference, however



ABOVE It's easy to get lulled into a rhythm, relying on the same mix of Vigors, guns and stat-altering gear because it produces reliable results. But do so and you'll miss out on the fun other combinations of powers offer

urgency of her unpredictably tossing potions, health and ammo your way never strikes a discordant tone.

Elizabeth provides just one part of *Infinite*'s combat overhaul, which in its best moments takes full advantage of all that extra space up in the clouds. Columbia's Sky-Line system links together some grand open battlefields, and the generously magnetised pull of DeWitt's Sky-Hook enables him to use its rails for heroic leaps and grandstanding getaways. Travelling along a rail grants time to reload, recover and formulate new strategies before either jumping to a fresh vantage point or waiting until the track brings you back around.

In a wider sense, *Infinite*'s shooting hasn't moved that far beyond *BioShock*'s. Many of its guns still feel weedy, outperformed by the Vigors and their various explosive, telekinetic and elementally damaging effects, and many of its tougher enemies still tend towards being overly damage absorbent. But as the game's plot ramps up and its arenas open out, you're encouraged to think more tactically about 3D space. There's none of the preplanned, player-instigated combat against powerful foes that makes Big Daddy encounters so distinct, but there's a focus on moment-to-moment improvisation in its place.

Sadly, as the combat opens up, the story begins to slowly unravel. There's no golf club moment, no singular twist around which the tale turns. Instead, *Infinite* provides a series of revelations that have you replaying earlier sections with a more enlightened, inquisitive eye. But while these third act disclosures don't render *Infinite* incoherent, they do take the story to a place where notions of coherency and consequence no longer seem to matter, before backtracking and then attempting to offer a finality that doesn't make sense within the universe the game has created. It loses sight of Columbia, too, in a way that *BioShock* never forgot Rapture. Columbia's fascinating, but it's not what *Infinite* is about. *Infinite* is about Elizabeth, some key players, and its own sci-fi mythology. Columbia just plays host to and catalyses these things. With those plot elements it does care about, it conjures some affecting and unexpected scenarios – as well as a few silly ones – but even they are undermined by the ultimate sci-fi sin: being hopelessly unclear of their own rules, despite the seeming certainty of the characters acting within them.

That these disappointments are so keenly felt reflects your investment in the story being told, as well as that *Infinite* is an artfully constructed game with a meticulously well-drawn world. The tale it tells is gripping, if confused by the end, and it's hard not to care for Elizabeth. She alone would make this a worthy follow-up to 2007's hit, which provided a similarly smart, thrilling adventure, but one that kept its principle actors distant.

BioShock Infinite is a sequel, in short – more so than *BioShock 2*. Irrational has made a game in thematic dialogue with its predecessor, with the same interests but different tastes, and one that expands mechanically and technically on what came before. And it's given us a city in the sky that reflects upon the one beneath the waves.

9



BY ANY OTHER NAME

Vigors are Plasmids, in case there was any doubt. To be fair, if *Infinite* didn't have them then the first part of its name would be entirely unjustified, seeing as Columbia's weird science has most of its origin in physics. Still, they're handy in battle, even though Irrational has made the strange decision to hold back the one Vigor that doesn't have a functional equivalent in Rapture until the very end of the game. Elsewhere, Telekinesis has been dressed up with a watery theme and Insect Swarm has evolved into A Murder Of Crows. Infinite's Big Daddy knock-offs, the Handymen are similarly under-explained.

Post Script

Why Infinite doesn't preach pacifism

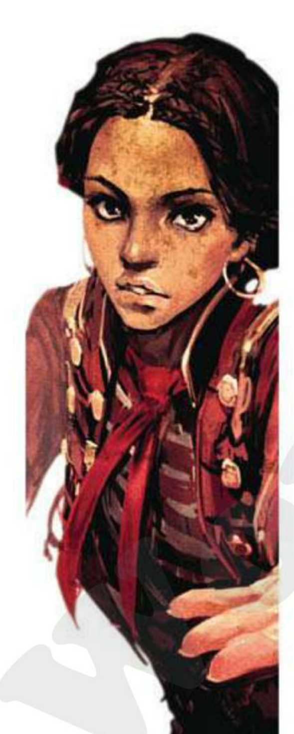
Every now and then, *BioShock Infinite* offers you a choice. There's one point, however, where the game seems fairly certain what you're going to choose. DeWitt has just rescued Elizabeth, and the pair are exploring Columbia's equivalent of a fairground, complete with beach and amusement arcade. After a while, the ex-Pinkerton detective and his charge head up towards an airship departure lounge in search of passage out of the city. At this point, things get weird. A smartly dressed woman rather transparently tricks Elizabeth into divulging her name, then follows behind you up the stairs. Next, the ticket seller refuses to greet you. Instead, he mutters quietly on the phone, casting awkward glances in your direction and asking an unseen figure how he's supposed to proceed. So, *BioShock Infinite* asks you, are you going to keep asking for a ticket, or will DeWitt draw his gun?

You'd need be pretty foolish – and to have never seen a thriller – to think that DeWitt will get served if you keep waiting patiently. *Infinite* dares you to draw because it wants you to instigate, and be culpable in, the fighting that's about to occur. This is a crucial moment in the game: it's the point where Elizabeth sees the violence DeWitt is capable of and, therefore, the point where *Infinite* has to reconcile its identity as a character-driven drama with its love of shooting people, making them float in the air and then blasting them with crows that appear from nowhere. It's the bit where the story confronts the game.

To be fair to *Infinite*, it doesn't try to hide its nature. The first moment of violence – when DeWitt plunges his Sky-Hook in the eye socket of some unfortunate member of the Columbian constabulary – gorily breaks any lingering spell that your heavenly introduction to Columbia might have cast. It's an unabashed declaration of intent. Besides, there's a pulpy quality to *BioShock*'s science fiction and a weirdness to its world that stops everything feeling too real. But stop to think and you'll realise that *Infinite* doesn't have the easy get-out clause to excuse its protagonists that the first two games enjoyed. The people DeWitt murders aren't genetically reconfigured maniacs, after all, but ordinary citizens – products of a one-note xenophobic culture whipped up by a hateful preacher into a fervour. They don't even do DeWitt the courtesy of wearing horrific animal masks left over from an ill-starred masquerade ball.

Of course, what Columbia's unfortunate finest can't know is that DeWitt's a mentally scarred veteran of Wounded Knee, the final battle of the American-Indian wars. This, you might recall, is Niko Bellic's excuse, too, with his experience of conflict leaving him nihilistically numbed to the violence his various employers request in *GTAIV*. Bellic's problem is an aggravating hypocrisy: he claims to be after a fresh start even as he beats his latest victim to death for $250. DeWitt, at least, is more honest: he really doesn't care. The problem is Elizabeth. The game makes much of the moment where she bloodies her hands for the first time, but she's already assisted DeWitt in leaving hundreds of bodies behind.

BioShock has such fun with violence. Vigors are toys and enemies are ragdolls you're invited to test them out on



Still, it comes as something of a relief that *Infinite* doesn't try to judge you for the violence in which it makes you complicit. We're thoroughly sick of end-of-game bosses asking us what separates us from them by now. *Far Cry 3* tried to have its cake and repeatedly stab it with a story that seemed to explore gaming violence clichés via an unflinching reliance on gaming violence clichés. Even *Spec Ops*, for all its intelligent handling of these questions and its implicit rejection of violence as entertainment, didn't actually take the bold, dangerous step of explicitly rejecting violence as entertainment.

And *BioShock* has such fun with violence, too. Vigors are toys and enemies are ragdolls you're invited to test them out on. Lara Croft's new origin story is as equally blind to the psychopathic tendencies and death-dealing proficiency of its protagonist as any other game we might mention, but there is at least an urgency to its combat, a kill-or-be-killed need to put distance between your foes and stay in cover. *Infinite*'s combat is about the joy of experimentation. It's about figuring out exactly what will happen when you use Shock Jockey after dousing Columbian soldiers with water courtesy of Undertow, about watching contentedly as a mech you've possessed turns its back on you and starts firing indiscriminately upon the soldiers who were its allies, about the unqualified joy of knocking screaming soldiers off unfenced platforms into the sky. As the story moves to its conclusion, you're handed more justifications for DeWitt's tendencies, but the game stops short of berating you for indulging them. And it asks your suspension of disbelief in return.

Yet it's hard not to poke round Columbia during quieter moments, listen to audiotapes, take in the view, and watch Elizabeth delightedly inspect what might well be the first tripod camera she's seen and wonder if this alone couldn't be the game. It's tough not to question if the guns couldn't come out less often, if DeWitt could solve a few more environmental puzzles and leave fewer bodies behind. But gaming is a conservative business and cities with the production values of Columbia are built on digital blood, not the sweat of a mentally taxed brow. Games can construct complex, rich spaces and tell affecting stories, but they're often about killing lots of people. Many of them realise it, but none are going to write their way out of that conflict. ■

SimCity

Publisher EA
Developer Maxis
Format Mac, PC (version tested)
Release Out now

Having spent the past five years coming to terms with DLC, microtransactions and F2P, the next five look to be about always-online games. Publishers claim it's the natural extension of games as services. Players counter that it's intrusive DRM, an assault on their rights and it stops them playing their games on the train. To some, *SimCity* just became the equivalent of Bethesda's horse armour: an exemplar of everything they fear the future holds. Given what *SimCity* used to represent, and the game that's still at its core, that's a shame.

Let's list the mistakes. First, it wasn't possible to pre-load the game before the minute of release. That led to Origin's servers being overwhelmed in the hours after launch. When players did have the game installed and ready to play, they found the servers unable to cope with demand, being either down or sticking them in lengthy queues. And once they did finally connect, they were likely to be disconnected shortly thereafter, sometimes losing progress.

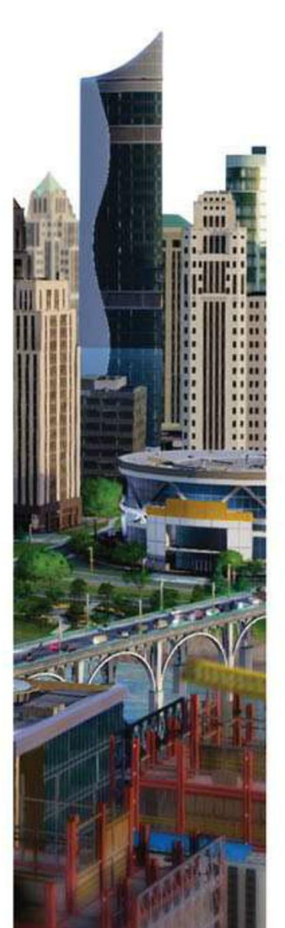
EA scrambled to respond, adding more servers, reworking its infrastructure, and temporarily dropping some of the functionality used to justify the always-online requirement in the first place. At the time of writing, some features – including the fastest game speed – are still unavailable.

The result is that people bought a game that didn't work at all or didn't work as advertised, and it's tempting to write the game off here. Please don't, because there are good reasons to drive into the heart of *SimCity*, both to discover sights worth seeing and to learn how deep its problems run.

There are good reasons to drive into SimCity, both to discover sights worth seeing and to learn how deep its problems run

Released in 1989, the original *SimCity* was a revelation. It was a sandbox game about building a functioning city, but its simulation was balanced such that the challenges stacked: you might solve your power shortage with more power plants, but you risked meltdown and brownouts; you could provide more jobs by zoning for cheap industry, but the pollution would cause citizens to get sick. There were specific scenarios, but you didn't need them. *SimCity*'s clockwork simulation was the game.

The new *SimCity* understands this. You begin as before, placing down roads and then zoning for three types of building: residential areas for your population to build houses in, commercial areas where they'll do their shopping, and industry where they'll work. Pop down a water pump, a power plant, and a sewage filtration plant, and the simulation hums to life. Construction trucks stream into town, buildings sprout from the ground, followed by moving vans delivering residents. Open one of the new data layers and you can see the heart of the simulation beating underneath. Water can be watched as it flows to each building, sewage can be seen being flushed away, and in time, you can see the creeping impact of your town's industry as pollution spreads through the ground.



From here, the process of developing your cities is almost identical to previous games. You place health clinics, police and fire stations, and schools. These services cost money, so you need more taxpayers. You zone more residential, and upgrade the roads so your original neighbourhoods switch from small houses to apartment blocks. Traffic slows to a crawl, so you build a mass transit system. Then you might place parks, which attract wealthier inhabitants, who in turn require a higher class of shop and industry, and a better education system.

While previous games were always punishingly difficult, it's relatively easy to build a functioning, profitable city in less than an hour. This brings two changes to *SimCity*'s long game. The first is the specialisations system. Each city can be focused on a single purpose. Cities that specialise in tourism can become a miniature Las Vegas, littered with casinos. A mining or drilling town built on a large supply of ore, coal or oil will deliver huge profits, but produce a similarly grand amount of pollution. There's also trade, electronics, culture and education.

Each of these goals gives more structure to *SimCity*'s open play, with targets – make 800,000 Simoleons in oil profits in a day, say – gating access to buildings and upgrades. Thankfully, it never overwhelms the core sandbox. Specialisations instead force you to make extreme decisions in crafting a city, and push you towards the kinds of infrastructure problems that are fun to try to solve.

The second change is the game's shift from micro- to macro-management. Old games of *SimCity* used to begin with not just the placing of roads, but the careful construction of a network of sewer pipes, water pipes and power cables. Now your roads are more than just the backbone of your traffic system: everything automatically flows down them, at least as long as there's the appropriate sewage treatment centre or nuclear plant placed somewhere en route.

That means that you'll spend less time making systems more efficient on this zoomed-in scale. Instead you'll leap up to the region view. Cities in a region can be interdependent as never before; if your city's low on power, you can buy it from another with a surplus. That city can, of course, be run by another player, which serves as one of the tenuous explanations for always-online functionality.

In reality, the system works much better without others. If you're dependent on a friend's city for power, and they lose interest in it, you might find it deleted and your metropolis in the dark. But on your





ABOVE The two most important data layers are Building Density and Land Value. Here, density is shown. A tall green bar means the building is likely to expand into its larger form, while a short red one means unhappy Sims



TOP Pollution is a major concern in *SimCity*. This data layer shows the way in which ground pollution has spread from the city's oil industry. If this pollution reaches residential areas, Sims will begin getting sick. ABOVE Residential and commercial buildings have different versions based on wealth, but industrial buildings advance through three tech levels. Getting the highest, cleanest, most advanced tech requires a great education system. RIGHT The game uses a tilt-shift effect, a photography technique traditionally used to make the real world look like a miniature model. It mostly makes *SimCity* look like a bustling place, but sometimes it just makes it blurry



own, you can find yourself hopping from one city to another in quick succession. You'll build a city and realise it needs more tourists to visit its upmarket shops, and so switch to your neighbouring town to place a train station to smooth the commute.

This is all a natural expansion of *SimCity*'s normal balancing act, and if that was the end of it, this would be a smartly presented rebirth of a classic game. This is not the end of it. The downside to this city-hopping is that it's necessary, because each city is brutally small. When we think of cities, we think of New York, Dubai and Shanghai – places of huge scale. By comparison, *SimCity*'s cities evoke Delaware or Hull. Residential skyscrapers rub up awkwardly against industrial factories. Buildings need to be continually destroyed and moved to make space for extensions. New road tools allow for complicated, curling designs, but the small space makes efficiency a higher priority than creativity.

Those now all-powerful roads reveal other problems. As a node of electricity shoots through your network, it bounces randomly around until, eventually, it finds a building that needs a top up. Bafflingly, pedestrians and cars seem to operate on a similar system. Given a specific destination, cars will always plot the most direct route between two points. If there's a traffic-packed dirt road ahead of them, and a six-lane highway one block over, they'll pile on the dirt road to wait for hours. This makes it nearly impossible to create efficient road networks.

The pathfinding causes problems in every part of the simulation. You might find two houses next to each other with a shop directly across the street. When clicked upon, one house will say: "There's great shopping in this town!" The house next door will say: "We can't find anywhere to shop."



SUITE OF LEARNING

Individually placed buildings – fire stations, power plants, universities and so on – can be edited and expanded with new external buildings. In the case of a lot of buildings, those external additions unlock new features for your city and region, such as helping you to bring fire services to neighbours, or better trading prices on the global market. In the case of the university, you can add new schools. The School Of Engineering shown above is currently researching clean oil extraction, which can then cut back on ground pollution produced by industry across the entire region.

ABOVE Firemen rush to fires, but the AI messes this up too. Sometimes the game will dispatch six trucks to a single blaze. Trucks two through six will sit behind the first and do nothing while the rest of your city burns

In the end, the most damning problem might be the way in which the sim populace's simple-mindedness breaks the illusion you're playing with a real city. Follow a driver from their house in the morning and they'll go to the nearest vacant job. Once inside the building, they essentially cease to exist. At the end of the day, they'll drive home – and home is the first empty house they pass. There is no permanence to either home or work, and after noticing this people and buildings just devolve into numbers. Any fantasy of urban planning becomes nothing more than manipulating a clearly flawed AI.

There's still fun to be had in *SimCity*. The tilt-shift world is beautiful, and from a distance the city still heaves with life. The series maintains a socially progressive bent to its simulation of civic goals. None of the previous games, now so revered, ever had a perfect simulation either: *SimCity 4*, for one, had the same pathfinding problems.

EA has also been improving the game since launch. That doesn't excuse the shoddy state of it during launch week, but it does mean there's hope that more issues will be resolved. For now, *SimCity* is good for the reasons it's always been good, and bad for reasons old and new. And yes, we wish we could play it on the train. But after spending two weeks as mayor of a series of teeming pocket metropolises, we're still ready to spend more.

6

Post Script

What's the future for always-online gaming?

On March 18, just two weeks after the launch of *SimCity*, EA CEO John Riccitiello resigned after six years in charge. It's tempting to link the two events. *SimCity*'s early weeks have been a disaster, and a lot of player outrage had been focused at the publisher. EA itself has long been the subject of ire, too. It killed Westwood and Bullfrog. It releases games in yearly cycles. It embraces DLC and microtransactions. It killed Origin; it launched Origin. In the hours following Riccitiello's departure, players celebrated on threads across the Internet like revellers at a blood sacrifice.

In reality, the resignation had more to do with EA's struggling stock price and a weak financial forecast. But how does a company become so reviled even as it continues to release successful games? *SimCity*'s launch and 'always-online' requirement – a clumsy phrase to describe videogames that require a permanent Internet connection in order to play – is a case study in how miscommunication and conflicting goals can turn a passionate, engaged audience into frothing rioters.

From EA's perspective, always-online games are a response to the very same factors that caused Riccitiello to resign. In 2008, the global recession hit, and with it the stock prices of game companies crashed. EA's attempts to stop money seeping from its pores have not been entirely successful. It took risks in attempting to create new franchises such as *Mirror's Edge* and *Spore*. It bought BioWare to create an MMOG and new console hits. It bought PopCap to get a foothold in mobile.

The initiatives that have brought EA large-scale success of late are its dalliances with new business models: selling trousers in *Battlefield Heroes*, football cards in *FIFA*, and DLC for everything else. In this new world, always-online makes sense to publishers, because it keeps us closer. It makes it easier to keep an audience engaged, and in turn makes it easier to sell expansions and DLC. *SimCity* must have seemed like the perfect fit, too: the return of a long absent and beloved PC classic would surely win over the masses and stem the financial tide while the new consoles dribbled out.

From a player perspective, always-online is another in a long line of business models disguised as features. Even if it does make it easier to update a game (and it does), and even if that is good for players (and it can be), there's always the sense that this isn't EA's real motivation, which it's not. Forget about what EA did or didn't promise: always-online was sold hard as one of *SimCity*'s features, but the only reason to pursue the development of something so contentious is that EA thinks it will make more money over the long haul.

This disagreement over how to think about the issue causes immediate problems, because there's a difference between how the public reacts to poor business practice – with indignation, a recital of consumer rights, and a sense of entitlement – and how it reacts to a broken feature. The latter rarely inspires such righteous fury.

> In confirming players' worst fears about the business model to which it is tied, SimCity has become a dark symbol



SimCity courted both reactions. The very servers that are now required to play the game struggled to handle the sudden influx of hundreds of thousands of players and buckled under the load, showing up EA's business plan. Meanwhile, the AI and simulation – features that had looked and sounded inspiring in trailers and hype – turned out to be dim-witted.

That combination has caused *SimCity* to cross over a tipping point where its merits as a game barely even matter any more. In failing to deliver on promises, even only perceived promises, and in confirming players' worst fears about the business model to which it has been tied, *SimCity* has become a dark symbol, no matter how many patches are subsequently released to fill in its many cracks. EA executives are unlikely to lose their jobs because of such snafus, but they should still be wary of them.

From the outside looking in, this makes the situation maddening. People are playing *SimCity* for 40 hours and coming away furious. It's seems likely they must have been having fun for at least some of that time, but it also makes it hard to imagine the game's reputation ever fully recovering. To many players, *Diablo III* is still defined by the error 37 bug that marred its first week. Even with over a million copies sold, *SimCity* will be similarly scarred, and EA scrambling to explain itself and offer free games as compensation won't make much difference to the diehards.

Always-online, meanwhile, will bounce back. On March 12, Blizzard Entertainment released *StarCraft II: Heart Of The Swarm*. It doesn't quite require an Internet connection, but there's no LAN multiplayer, and even skirmishes against the AI require you to be connected. When the previous game in the series, *Wings Of Liberty*, was released, this was a major point of contention. For *HOTS* the fan response isn't just muted, it's practically nonexistent. Why? Because *Wings Of Liberty* worked and people got over it.

There are perfectly reasonable motivations for publishers and developers to want always-online games, and a few benefits for players. There are also legitimate reasons for those who play games to hate it. Unfortunately, those opposed to it seem doomed to be unsatisfied. EA already has at least one other game in development that's due to use the same system, and it seems unlikely to change direction given its vested interest in force-feeding the concept to players until it becomes the fat-livered golden goose that it needs. Always online, then, is here to stay. ■

StarCraft II: Heart Of The Swarm

Publisher Blizzard Entertainment
Developer In-house
Format Mac, PC
Release Out now

There's a moment in *Heart Of The Swarm*'s campaign when its star, Sarah Kerrigan, asks her Zerg chief scientist whether he is aiming for perfection with his genetic experimentation. No, he replies, he isn't. Perfection is never possible, because it's forever a moving goal, and so he's consigned to merely follow it. Sure, it's spoken by a dripping sexual organ of a character in one of the most deliriously schlocky games in recent memory, but it's an idea that gets to the heart of *StarCraft*'s multiplayer. Broadly, it hasn't changed in 15 years, and yet it still hasn't lost any of its capacity to entrap players and spectators within its dizzyingly complex interplay of unit abilities and human skill. As time passes, strategies are revised and meld, new tactics become standard plays, and rediscoveries of past successes undercut those of today and in turn become popular again. *StarCraft*, for its players, is a constantly shifting battleground where perfection always lies tantalisingly out of reach.

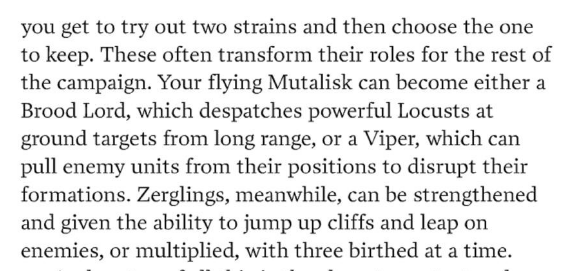
But our oozing friend doesn't speak for *StarCraft*'s core game design, which is, more or less, perfection. If it wasn't, it wouldn't still be at the peak of the RTS genre. And this is Blizzard's boon and its bane. How can it build on what's fundamentally already finished? *HOTS*, which follows 2010's *Wings Of Liberty* as the second part of a trilogy of games under the *StarCraft II* banner, answers this question by adding seven new units across its three races' multiplayer rosters, 26 new maps and a redesigned front-end interface. That's enough to remake the game for its hardcore players, perhaps, who will be eager to discover the new strategies these enable, but what about the rest of us?

The obvious attraction for those without a vested interest in multiplayer is the campaign, which picks up directly after *Wings Of Liberty*. Rich and entertaining, it builds on *WOL*'s playful approach to the strictures of the RTS genre with a varied set of 20 main missions divided across five short storylines. Each tale takes you to a different location, documents Kerrigan's efforts to bring the Zerg swarm together, and as a group they offer excuses for you to be piloting battlecruisers in space one moment, taking on boss battles the next, and then directing intimate single-unit engagements and partaking in light stealth soon after. Sometimes you'll encounter multiple styles in the same mission. The campaign is generous, too, with almost every level introducing a new unit or plaything for you to get your head around as well as giving you choices over your army's abilities and what set of missions to tackle next.

The campaign's strength lies in the fact that it doesn't feel the need to live up to the formality of multiplayer. For a start, it offers an expanded set of unit types, and for each you can select one of three augmentations that buff certain abilities. Seven units can be further improved in Evolution missions, in which


The campaign's generous, with almost every level introducing a new unit or plaything for you to get your head around




you get to try out two strains and then choose the one to keep. These often transform their roles for the rest of the campaign. Your flying Mutalisk can become either a Brood Lord, which despatches powerful Locusts at ground targets from long range, or a Viper, which can pull enemy units from their positions to disrupt their formations. Zerglings, meanwhile, can be strengthened and given the ability to jump up cliffs and leap on enemies, or multiplied, with three birthed at a time.

And on top of all this is the almost constant and battle-turning presence of one of the story's lead characters, usually Kerrigan. Here *HOTS* seems to look back to *Warcraft III* (perhaps through the lens of the popularity of the MOBAs that game inspired), packing in abilities that add direct control to the tactics: single-target blasts, healing, stun attacks, area damage and much more. Kerrigan herself levels as you complete missions, unlocking tiers of new abilities, including passive powers such as Zerglings automatically restocking at no cost at your home base when they're killed, or Vespene gas extractors not requiring drones to operate. Some players might feel that such abilities take away from *StarCraft*'s tactical purity, given you can often muddle through with these powerful units, which even get resurrected after a short cooldown period if they die. But they make for dynamic confrontations that are less at the mercy of inexperience or poor planning than the scenarios found in many singleplayer RTSes.

They also mitigate the fact that the missions can be little too tightly controlled. You're usually following pointers to the next objective, the challenge lying in balancing these with going off the track to achieve secondary goals, rather than freely building up armies and smashing the opposition under your own steam. On the other hand, there are more official achievements and intricate personal objectives to apply yourself to, backed by reports after each mission about various relevant statistics, including Kerrigan's lowest heath level and the time taken to kill certain enemies. The scenarios are honed to a sheen, too, subtly balanced to ramp up the action at certain points, such as an all-out attack on a position we were tasked to hold. Just as the counter ticked down to zero, we found our defences overrun, but we'd held for just long enough.

HOTS in general is just as honed. Its production values are stellar and speak to both its three years in development and its hundreds-strong credits list. Magnificent CGI and in-engine cutscenes tell the story. Every unit has portrait animations, and multiple gruesomely detailed models will appear in the field depending on the mutation you've chosen and the eggs from which they hatch. Every character has some context-specific line to say at any point during the campaign, and every unit its own growl, chitter or rattle.





ABOVE Kerrigan's abilities are accessed via the Q, W and E keys, a scheme that quietly gets newer players acclimatised to the concept of using hotkeys, which are fundamental to playing *StarCraft II* at its higher levels





TOP Many of the campaign's levels seem to nod to MOBA design, with buildings generating the equivalent of creeps that you must support in order to defeat your enemy. The Zerg turn out to provide the ideal kind: weak but innumerable. **ABOVE** *HOTS* includes a new physics system that doesn't affect play but rewards kills with flailing ragdolls and cascading debris. **LEFT** Many of the campaign's new units' capabilities rely on close control to use properly – the finer points of a Viper or the Brood Mother shown here aren't going to be grasped by most novice players

ABOVE Evolution missions allow you to try alternative versions of familiar units, both highlighting them and teaching you their powers. In the thick of battle, though, only the best players will tend to use them effectively

The music is fully orchestrated, but with an overlay of squealy electric guitar. This mix works better than you might think, channelling both the epic, emotional struggle that the story follows (star-crossed lovers and the deaths of millions of innocents) and the gross-out horror that the Zerg as a race exemplifies.

As it happens, the Zerg are the highlight of *HOTS*'s melodramatic tale of revenge. Despite lacking human faces, they're a far more interesting bunch than the earnestly conventional Terrans of *WOL*. Through Abathur, the chief scientist – who speaks in clipped sentences about genetic purity, efficiency, and spinning strands of essence into better-evolved creatures – we see a depth of conceptualisation. For him, giving Swarm Queens greater intelligence is a waste of energy and challenges the imperative that the swarm must never threaten its queen. He sees Kerrigan as distastefully infected with weak and messy Terran genetics, and death as an irrelevance for a race that holds only genetic essence as important. His clash of understanding with Kerrigan, who encourages individuality, is surprisingly engrossing. And, yes, gross in the best kind of way.

The level of tactical options available to you by the campaign's end is overwhelming. And it's here that *HOTS* falters in its real quest, which is to bring more players who enjoy the campaign through to multiplayer. On top of its obvious additions to *WOL*, *HOTS* (although Blizzard has generously also opened these features to *WOL* players as well) has overhauled how you access multiplayer. *WOL* gave barely any training to campaign veterans before their emergence into the very different world of multiplayer, but now the Matchmaking screen features four tiles – Training, Versus AI, Unranked and Ranked – which are intended to ease the passage. They're not enough to make the process radically smoother, though. Training teaches simple early-game build orders well, prompting you when you should be building critical structures, but as your tree of strategic choice fans out, the tutorial drops your hand. Is an army of Hydralisks and Roaches enough? When should I be applying upgrades and expanding my base? How do I build Ultralisks? Why did I just get smashed again? Blizzard's answer, apparently, is simply to keep challenging the AI – which smartly and automatically gauges itself against your skill so you can see the level at which you play – until you work it out for yourself. Then you move to Unranked games to get a feel for human style, and then finally to the wilds of Ranked when you're a master. It's a more legible and less abrupt progression than before, but it still only caters to thousands of players, rather than the hundreds of thousands for whom the move to *StarCraft*'s multiplayer will be daunting.

So Blizzard hasn't quite pulled off the act of balancing *StarCraft* as an entity for all players, but there's still something substantial here for everyone. For an expansion, *HOTS* is a dense package, adeptly fashioned and hugely enjoyable. But while its core game might be perfection, *HOTS* itself isn't. Perhaps the idea that Blizzard can make *StarCraft* for everyone is as crazy as Abathur's quest. But that doesn't mean that Blizzard isn't, or shouldn't be, trying. Now it will be hoping to get there with *StarCraft II*'s third expansion, *Legacy Of The Void*.

9



SEEING THE QUEEN

Blizzard's depiction of Kerrigan is, shall we say, complicated. Seen from one perspective, she's a fierce and iron-strong leader, facing the horrors she commits in order to achieve her goals with resolution and maturity. And in some ways, part of the story is an inversion of the save the princess trope, with her out to rescue old flame Jim Raynor. Yet she has a habit of going all gooey when Raynor's around, and the campaign manages to reverse that inversion by the end. On top of that, there's her outfit, which relegates her to sex object even when issuing orders or facing down foes.

God Of War: Ascension

Publisher SCE
Developer In-house (Santa Monica)
Format PS3
Release Out now

This has been a long generation for Sony, but a quiet one for Kratos. Nathan Drake has fronted an entire trilogy on PS3 and *Assassin's Creed* has settled into an annual cycle, but this is only the second *God Of War* game on the console, with a three-year gap between the pair. While that avoids familiarity breeding contempt, it also means developer Sony Santa Monica has had fewer chances to recognise that several elements of the *God Of War* template could do with modernisation. Much of what you'll find in *Ascension*'s singleplayer is unchanged from the eight-year-old PS2 original. QTEs – hopefully dubbed 'context-sensitive actions' – are everywhere. Rather than celebrate its Greek mythological setting, *Ascension* fixates on ultraviolence and bare breasts. Bump into one of the many invisible walls and Kratos just runs on the spot.

But six games and eight years on from his debut, Kratos has learned a few new tricks. He's a more agile climber, for one thing. He now automatically clambers from one handhold to the next, with a tap of the jump button flinging him across larger distances. He's still no Lara Croft – and he remains in possession of the most comically awkward-looking double jump in gaming – but it's a welcome change to a moveset that has remained largely static since his 2005 debut.

It's not the only addition to *Ascension*'s singleplayer mode, but it's one of the better ones. Kratos can now plant a blade in a surface and slide down it, and the first time you slalom your way down an incline, weaving back and forth to avoid obstacles, you can't help but think of *Journey*, in which Sony Santa Monica also had a hand. But *Journey*'s surfing sequence is so memorable because it's used sparingly, not half a dozen times in the opening few hours. And when *Ascension* asks you to tap X to jump over a gap while sliding, it's in a QTE with an input window that ends before you reach the edge. If you try to jump at the last second, you can expect to see the game over screen.

More in keeping with the Ancient Greece setting, *God Of War III*'s aggressively shiny art style has been replaced with a muted colour palette and a painterly look. Aesthetically, it's a great fit for PS3's twilight years, but the visual approach is full of frustrations. Sony Santa Monica's spectacle fetish frequently gets in the way, the camera pulling right out to show off a remarkable environment as the tiny speck under your control flails against a group of enemies. Some smart environmental puzzles are undermined by helper text telling you which of the three possible tools you need for every single job. Enemies spawn from the ground, so you're never quite sure when a fight is approaching its end. There's a maddening difficulty spike late on, too, where the studio seemingly realises it's spent 27 chapters giving you more healing orbs than anyone could need and insists you beat a succession of powerful foes without respite or checkpoints. We like a challenge, but only if the combat system is up to it.

There are some fine ideas in the series-first multiplayer mode that will form part of this genre's future template



Ascension's isn't. You alternate between light and heavy attacks, swishing your Blades Of Chaos in the vague direction of the harpies, polycephalic beasts and topless demon-things that surround you. You do this until they explode in a shower of orbs, or prompt you to grab them for either a rush of QTEs, a new *Infinity Blade*-style duel, or, if you're lucky, a canned animation and an instant kill. The studio's apparent distaste for hitstun remains – you can only interrupt the attack animations of smaller enemies and even that is frustratingly inconsistent. You're left with little sense that any attack is causing more damage than the others. While a Capcom-style hit pause is used on some combo finishers, it triggers before the attack has even connected, and thus applies even if the blow misses.

All of which would seem rather ominous for the series-first multiplayer mode. The online multiplayer brawler was explored last year with mixed results by Platinum Games' *Anarchy Reigns*, but *Ascension* is the first evolutionary step on from that precursor and there are some fine ideas here that will form part of this genre's future template. Instead of a fighting game roster, there are just four classes: the melee-focused Warrior, stealthy Assassin, ranged Battle Mage and a Support class. Each is customisable, with weapons and armour unlocked as you level and complete challenges (dubbed Labors), and each player takes one magic attack, support item and perk-like Relic into battle.

It's chaotic at first, with the large multi-tiered maps packed with things to capture, smash open, pick up and pull. You can yank a lever to activate a set of floor spikes, push a crank to spew flames from a nearby patch of ground, and even take control of a handily placed god and shoot enormous balls of fire at nearby enemies. The options are overwhelming, but start to make sense as you learn the levels, and the fixed camera you'll spend much of the singleplayer game cursing is an asset here: you can always see exactly what's going on and fight your opponents instead of the viewpoint.

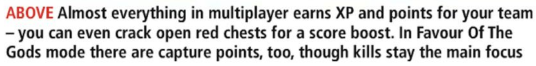
Ascension's biggest success is a colour-coding system that effectively lets you know when you have an opening and when to run. Unblockable attacks are signalled by a player glowing red, white denotes invincibility, and blue signals a player in recovery. It's a simple, smart system further improved by rock-paper-scissors combat (heavy beats parry beats light beats heavy), cooldown-controlled special moves and a logical, consistent approach to hitstun. Consider our expectations defied: this is the star of the show. While this series' singleplayer template is showing its age, there's plenty in *Ascension*'s multiplayer that deserves to survive the transition to PS4.

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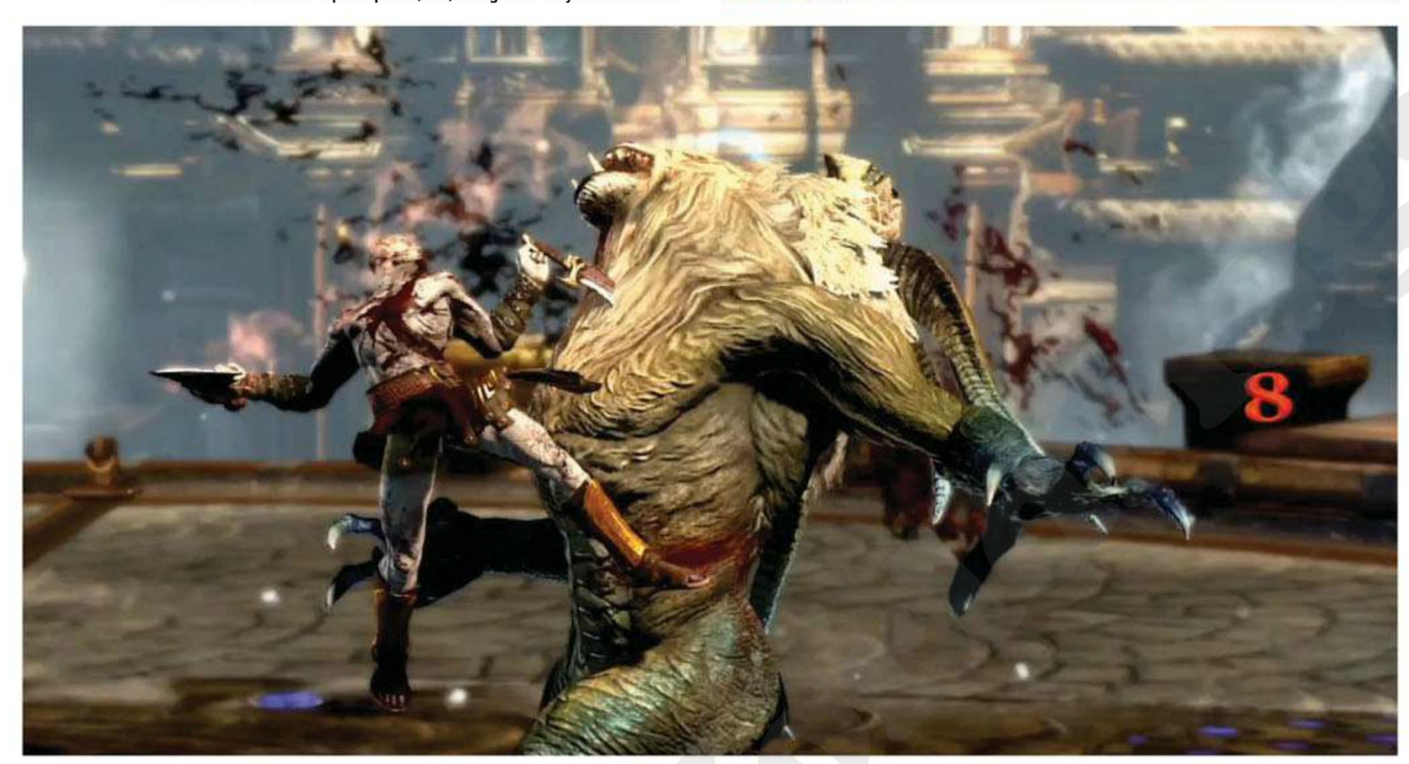


LEFT Kratos can give his blades one of four properties – electricity, fire, ice and soul – with a tap of a D-pad direction. Each has its own unlock tree and magic attack as well, although we found ourselves sticking with the damaging fire blades for most of the game. **BELOW** The sliding sections are curiously front-loaded, appearing constantly in the first few hours and then vanishing entirely from the later stages. It's almost as if the studio also grew tired of them. **BOTTOM** The finishing minigames, which appear when you defeat the game's tougher enemies, require you to mash attack buttons and dodge the occasional incoming blow. They show the game at its most brutal, too: heads are cleaved in two or pulled off entirely




ABOVE Almost everything in multiplayer earns XP and points for your team – you can even crack open red chests for a score boost. In Favour Of The Gods mode there are capture points, too, though kills stay the main focus





Gears Of War: Judgment

Gears Of War has never been the most pretentious series, but there have been moments when it grasped for the kind of gravitas usually reserved for games that are less about swearing and muscles and guns. Whether it was Dom dying against lonely Mad World piano music in *Gears 3* or a clumsy concentration camp allegory in *Gears 2*, there was always some cutscene insisting that this is more than a game. Not so for *Gears Of War: Judgment*, which goes out of its way at every moment to remind you that, yes, this is a game, and aren't games fun?

Judgment's Locusts advance in unprecedented numbers with only the barest regard for taking cover, your stars – a score system, more or less – are always visible onscreen, gibs and headshots are visibly totalled up on the left, and your friends' high scores are tracked on the right. Every level is broken into sections, and every section is preceded by a screen-filling option to make it harder and concluded with another screen-filling rundown of everyone's kills, headshots and deaths. "Would you like to retry?" it asks when you've fallen short of a three-star ranking, and it might as well be asking you to insert a coin for one more credit.

Judgment is, shamelessly, an arcade game. It's the *Gears Of War* combat loop stripped of the vehicular set-pieces, most of the box-ticking boss fights and almost all of the narrative. The effect is to turn every section of every level into a micro-sized Horde mission. Developer People Can Fly clearly understands what makes *Gears*' multiplayer tick so well that it thought to turn the best of *Gears* into the whole of *Gears*. Even the new multiplayer modes – Overrun and Domination – are built to facilitate Horde-style defensive and tactical play in the competitive space, while the new Free For All mode seems to exist only to keep the lone gun riffraff away from everyone playing *Gears* 'properly'.

Each room in *Gears*' segmented campaign is constructed like a miniature multiplayer map, and all are intricate and varied in their designs. In one, you'll find yourself assaulting a bridge, in another you're navigating underground vaults, in another still you're storming a beach beneath a hail of bullets and mortars. What little context writers Tom Bissell and Rob Auten manage to squeeze in between all the flying meat is *Gears Of War* writing at its most functional and its best. The brief cutscenes frame the next half-dozen rounds of slaughter, and throwaway voiceovers give context to each little killbox People Can Fly has built, but that's enough. These are spaces built for committing murders, not for telling stories, and *Judgment* never trips over its own narrative strings on the way to a good bloodbath.

You'll fight through some half-blind, through others against the clock and through others with exotic modifiers to your usual regenerating health. *Judgment* grows bored of itself as quickly as it grew bored of aping

Publisher Microsoft
Developer People Can Fly
Format 360
Release Out now



Spaces are built for committing murders, not for telling stories, and Judgment never trips over its own narrative strings



Gears Of War; sure, it was stuck with the cover system and camera, but why not change the controls to make grenades a little more flexible? Why not throw points and prize boxes into the mixer? Why not spawn enemies at random and in such numbers that your 360 barely has a chance to conjure up a plan for what they'll do when they arrive?

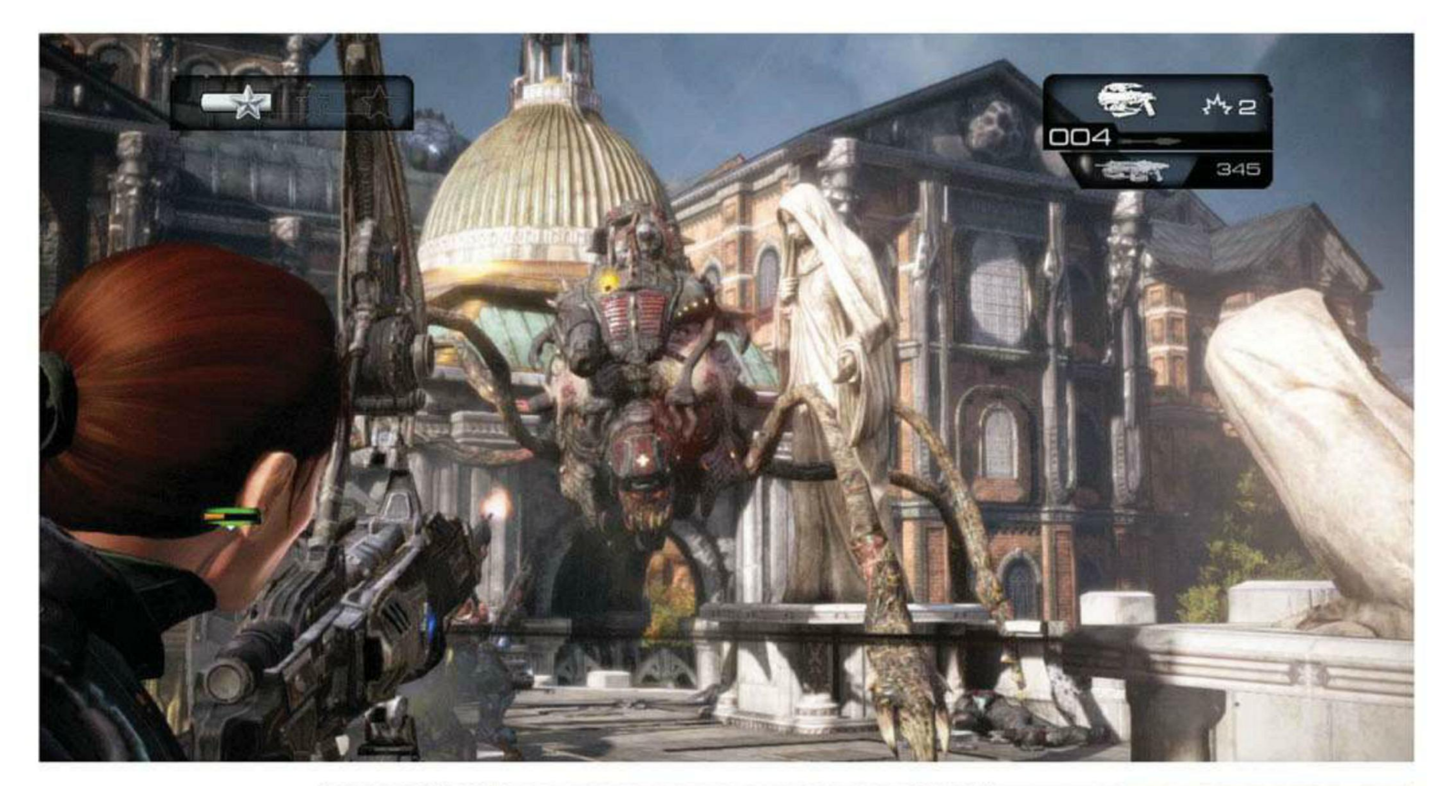
The Smart Spawn System, with its upper case esses, is *Judgment*'s most conspicuous back-of-the-box feature. Play a mission once and you'll see a couple of Boomers walking over the hill. Play again and it'll be a handful of Grinders. Play again and it's a Kantus flanked by Theron Guardsmen. Except it's never just a couple or a handful in *Judgment*, where Locusts spawn in their dozens and in random combinations, all making up in courage and heart what they lack in brain. They sprint directly into the line of fire and get their hearts and other important bits exploded across Sera's pseudo-Victorian brickwork, but isn't this how *Gears* has always played online, where cover is rarely as useful as a good evasive roll? *Judgment* is the first *Gears* to capture the ferocity and shape of the competitive online modes in its campaign, and the first *Gears* to be at home with being about nothing more than competitive chaos. It needed smart AI about as much as it needed the song from Donnie Darko.

Gears can live without brains, but *Judgment* suddenly feels empty when it loses the score system for the bonus Aftermath campaign. The weakest part of the game – material apparently scraped from *Gears Of War 3*'s cutting room floor – is the part that's most like classic *Gears*, which seems justification enough for People Can Fly's ideas on what the series should be.

Unlocked about halfway through the main campaign, Aftermath suffers from *Gears 3*'s preoccupation with sulking and is too short on *Judgment*'s unrestrained enthusiasm for things that explode. Everything about *Gears 3*'s campaign, even the bit Epic left out, seems to think war is hell and treats it as such. *Judgment* thinks war is brilliant and is such a riot that it feels more like a reboot than a spin-off.

Only its brevity and the limited multiplayer modes keep *Judgment* firmly in the 'not a real sequel' world, but it's a template for the next generation of *Gears* and a licence to experiment with the series' most sacred mechanics. There's no going back to the sombre hand-wringing of *Gears 3* after you've faced an army of machete-wielding madmen and been rewarded with a shiny pink gun from a magic prize box for your trouble. After seven years, 2006's cover and co-op mechanics have been so exhausted by Epic and its imitators that it's 1986's gimmicks – high scores, more enemies, faster action, ridiculous firepower – that make *Judgment* feel brand new.

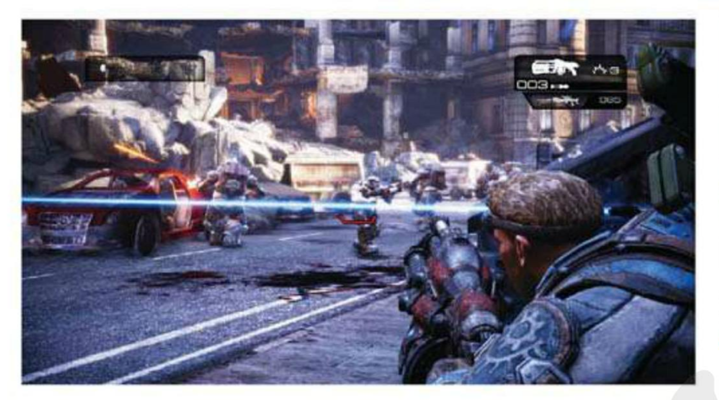
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ABOVE There are set-piece fights against enemies too unwieldy to be spawned into regular levels, but most spawns are intelligently randomised. A set of rules keeps enemy numbers and types balanced, and there's too little nuance in *Judgment*'s scoring system for the random encounters to skew the high score tables. **RIGHT** Set during the events of Emergence Day, *Judgment*'s levels are a series of testimonies from Kilo Squad's trial, with each testimony placing you in control of a different team member

BELOW *Judgment* takes in a museum, university and military base on the way to its conclusion, but its most interesting location is the Pendulum War victory parade, which was abandoned when the Locust emerged mid-celebration





ABOVE *Judgment* has little time for showing you spectacular vistas and epic set-pieces, but the reveal of Halvo's military academy is a special occasion and People Can Fly's best chance to show off its art design

Fire Emblem Awakening

Publisher Nintendo
Developer Intelligent Systems
Format 3DS
Release Out now (US), April 19 (JP, EU)

There's plenty of connective tissue between *Fire Emblem Awakening* and Intelligent Systems' other beloved turn-based strategy series, but that only makes the differences seem even starker. Put it this way: in all our hundreds of hours of *Advance Wars* play, we never once fell in love with a tank.

In *Awakening*, our tank is actually a Great Knight, and like all the units in our party, he has a name and a personality, too. Frederick is ineffably polite, all 'milord' this and 'milady' that, and has a phobia of bear meat. He's indispensable, but especially so in the early hours of the game. Right from the word go you'll be sending him off ahead of the group to one-shot enemy grunts and soften up tougher foes for his relatively weedy supporting cast to finish for much-needed XP.

The rest of the group will soon level up enough to catch up and even surpass him – another Knight, Kellam, is as good as invincible later on – but Frederick will be your first love in *Awakening*. He's strong. He's dependable. He's perfect marriage material. So once we'd helped him get over his phobia, we married him.

Just like the recent *Persona 4 Golden*, relationship management is a prerequisite for success in *Awakening*. Send a unit into battle with a friendly in the square next to them and the two join forces, with the adjacent companion granting stat bonuses, sometimes leaping across to block an enemy's strike, or if you're lucky, even launching an attack of their own. Pair up the same units enough times and you'll unlock a conversation between them, revealing a little more about each character and ranking up their relationship. The stronger the bond, the bigger the stat bonuses; reach S rank and, gender permitting, there'll be a proposal.

As you build relationships between party members, so you deepen your connection to them. In *Advance Wars*, we would happily send squad after squad of infantry out to die in the name of holding a position until the big guns arrived. Every unit was expendable. But how could you do something like that to Donnel, the farmer you rescued in a side mission who's proven himself so handy with a lance? Or to Ricken, who's grown from timid young mage to fearsome mounted Dark Knight, and who you've been helping compose letters home to his worried parents? You're not just the commander in *Fire Emblem*, you're a protector, too, and it's a role given even greater import by the fact that when a unit's gone, it's gone for good.

Permadeath (though units don't die per se, but are 'retired' and never seen again) naturally demands that you take a distinctly less gung-ho approach, and in that sense *Fire Emblem* is perhaps closer to *XCOM* than *Advance Wars*. The map overlay that shows every square on the board that's currently susceptible to enemy attack is perhaps your most powerful weapon, helping you ensure that your weaker units stay well out of trouble while the Fredericks and Kellams of your group stand invitingly in range. Perfectionists will reach for the 3DS's Home button to reset the game after a fatal mistake, though that becomes less of an option in the later, lengthier stages when victory's in sight and a restart might set you back an hour. A Newcomer setting – first introduced in Japan-only 2010 release *Heroes Of Light And Shadow*, but new to the west – allows those who find permadeath a turnoff to, well, turn it off.

Awakening offers an excellent game of strategy, but it's the relationship system that makes it



Even without the threat of losing a unit for good hanging over you, *Awakening*'s tough from the off, and maddeningly difficult at times. Nothing sets alarm bells ringing quite like a game's lowest difficulty setting being called Normal, and what most games would call Hard is here labelled Lunatic (and with good reason). Hit a wall in one of the main campaign's 25 chapters and you can head off the critical path to level up, either via Paralogues – self-contained side stories that see you clear out an enemy threat with a new addition to your party as reward – or Challenges. These small battles see you return to areas visited earlier in the campaign that have been reinfested, typically by low-level enemies. A Reeking Box, purchased from the merchants that set up shop in cleared parts of the world map, provides further scope for grinding, summoning a band of foes to your current location.

Depending on difficulty level and the number of times you hit the Home button after an untimely death, there's at least 30 hours of play here, while another 25 chapters, many featuring characters from previous games in the series, are due as DLC. It's lavish stuff, with frequent anime cutscenes, and in-engine battle animations that, while lacking *Advance Wars'* pleasing chunkiness due to the complexity of the character models, have a charm of their own. It's a fine tale, too; standard fantasy stuff, admittedly, but well told, seeing your created character help safeguard the titular Fire Emblem from those who would use this all-powerful MacGuffin for their own devious ends. And if you're only here for the strategy, fret not: every cutscene and line of dialogue can be skipped, and battle animations sped up or switched off entirely.

Awakening offers an excellent game of strategy, but it's the relationship system that makes it. It's why your heart will rapidly find its way to your mouth when you realise you've left your last remaining healer one square away from safety. It's why you'll grip your 3DS tight as an enemy bears down on a beloved mage who's down to a sliver of health, and punch the air as the knight in the adjacent square leaps across, blocks the incoming blow and one-shots the attacker. It's a game where care and attention off the battlefield is as much a winning tactic as canny unit placement on it. *Awakening* is a richer, deeper game as a result.

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RIGHT *Fire Emblem*'s rock-paper-scissors combat – lance beats sword beats axe beats lance – remains, but is far from crucial. There are so many other factors to consider, including bows, magic and airborne foes, as well as stats such as Strength and Defense



LEFT Rundown forts dot the map, and units left on one at the end of a turn will receive a small health refill at the start of the next. Some squares sparkle, too – send a unit to these for an XP or stat boost





ABOVE The game opens with you awakening (see?) in a field with no memory of your past. You somehow know Chrom, Lord of Ylisse, who will soon become a close ally. Lissa, his sister, proves a capable healer as well.
LEFT Character creation options are slim. You get a few choices of build, face, voice, hairstyle and colour, gender, and that's it. You have no control over your starting class either – a mage with a stock of electrical magic

Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate

Monster Hunter producer Ryozo Tsujimoto spent the free hours of his youth in Japan's arcades, watching over the shoulders of his peers in order to avoid wasting his limited pocket money. This way, he could learn playstyles and attack patterns as well as memorise enemy locations to make his handful of credits go that much further. Other players would insert their coins and make their mistakes while behind them Tsujimoto continued to watch and learn.

This attitude lies at the heart of the *Monster Hunter* series' design. Beginners learn the ropes not by reading instruction manuals or following step-by-step tutorials, but by watching and then doing. There's no quicker or better route to mastery than to team up with a trio of veterans and simply observe them at work while you operate on the periphery of a hunt. However much or little you contribute to the final result, every play session is important, because in *Monster Hunter* you never really stop learning. Whether it's an enemy variant or a fresh weapon type, there's always something to discover. And with more of just about everything packed in, *Ultimate* certainly earns its title as the most comprehensive game in the series to date.

It's not an entirely new game, of course. There's plenty of additional content here, but much of it is down a road more or less travelled in *Monster Hunter Tri*. Those who conquered that game may balk at having to repeat some 30 hours, even with a few changes along the way. An expanded arsenal is a welcome adjustment, though, with four weapon types absent from the Wii game making their return. The hunting horn is a curious beast, its blows hitting with hammer-like force while sounding notes that can be strung together for buffs. It makes for a fine support class, but requires close attention to attacks; when a monster rears up, ready to pounce, it's disconcerting to see a blunt instrument being played like a musical one. The versatile and descriptively named gunlance will likely become a firm favourite, even if you'll need a pouch full of whetstones to sharpen a blade regularly dulled by its projectiles. The bow is as you'd expect, while dual blades sacrifice defence for much greater attack speed and manoeuvrability, with the unfortunate side effect that switching back to a greatsword, say, makes the latter feel more sluggish than ever. Each weapon has its own control scheme and combo strings to master, but you're not told how they work, nor are you presented with a stream of new enemies to test them out on. Hunters must learn their weaponry's quirks on the job.

Ultimate, like its predecessors, is an idiosyncratic game. It's a tough sell precisely because it's so difficult to pigeonhole. It's ostensibly an action game, but much more slowly paced than that term would suggest. It's not quite an RPG either, although there's levelling and grinding involved. And while its world isn't open – each area is segmented into numbered zones – it's a sandbox game in every other respect. Guild quests offer a skeletal structure, but there's no pressure to stick to it. You can spend hours foraging for bugs and herbs, striking rocks for ore, killing low-level herbivores for resources, or forging a complete armour set with matching weapons. There's no wrong way to play and any failure is a valuable learning experience. Though it's a long game and occasionally a laborious one – you usually need to carve up several large beasts of the same type before getting the item you need for a new lance, such is the random nature of loot drops – time spent is rarely time wasted. It's a game of a thousand tiny victories. While it might not feel that way when you limp home from a mining expedition after being interrupted by an unexpected attack, it just means it's all the more satisfying when you slay a leviathan with equipment you made from material you spent hours harvesting. Each victory feels personal, even when you're fighting within a four-strong hunting party.

Publisher Nintendo
Developer Capcom
Format 3DS, Wii U (version tested)
Release Out now

You never really stop learning. Whether it's an enemy variant or weapon type, there's always something new to discover



LONELY? CONNECT
Singleplayer *Monster Hunter* can be a solitary pursuit, even with chirruping AI assistants in tow. The game's strangely modest about encouraging you to link up with other players, yet it needn't be so shy: *Ultimate* is a thoroughly engaging co-op experience, though it remains to be seen whether Capcom's decision to allow US and European hunters to team up will have any impact on the netcode. Linking to a Wii U game is also the only way for 3DS owners to play with others. But once you've downloaded a transfer program from the eShop, your hunter can tackle handheld missions on the commute before returning to the Wii U game with a pouch full of swag ahead of an evening of online battles.

Whether through stubbornness or habit, a few unwelcome design foibles do remain. You can only empty your pouch at the village hub, for example, which means it's all too easy to rush out into the wild with no room for spoils and then be forced to choose between returning prematurely to free up some inventory space or discarding an item forever. Item management in the field is still overly cumbersome, and in a game this challenging, a single wasted potion or trap can mean the difference between success and failure. The camera can only be adjusted in increments on the Y axis, and swinging it around in the heat of battle means you might find yourself staring at an enemy's feet. All these problems should theoretically be rectified by Wii U's GamePad, but the second screen's customisable panels (including, bizarrely, a virtual D-pad for camera controls) force you to look away from the main screen, which, as seasoned hunters will attest, is rarely an option. *Ultimate*'s hardly a technical showcase for Wii U, either, with some ugly textures and an inconsistent framerate betraying the game's Wii origins.

Such issues are soon forgotten in the rush when you fell your first large beast (even if the raptor-like Great Jaggi goes from feared opponent to bowgun fodder within hours), or witness the arrival of a monstrous ally summoned by the mimicry of the winged Qurupeco. Or, best of all, when you're lucky enough to get a front-row seat to a Brachydios-slaying masterclass, as one player pecks away at *Ultimate*'s headline beast from distance with poison arrows, another plays songs that heal and harm, and a third pierces that tough hide with sharp, precise thrusts of a lance, nimbly dodging the globs of plasma fired in defence. And all the while, like Tsujimoto, you continue to watch and learn.

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ABOVE Most of the 'new' monsters in *Ultimate* are taken from previous entries. Signature brute Brachydios is no Lagiacrus, and indeed will be overshadowed for many by a gorgeous ivory variant on the latter

TOP If you're finding the HUD intrusive, you can transfer it to the GamePad screen. It seems like a logical solution, but in practice it's not that helpful: enemies can cover plenty of ground in moments, and looking down to check your health or stamina can prove costly. **ABOVE** AI helpers battle gamely, but they aren't blessed with great intelligence. You can equip them with new masks to give them additional abilities, or give them restorative items to carry, but they rarely choose the most opportune moments to heal you and often retreat from the fray right at the point when you need them most. **RIGHT** It seems churlish to complain about the visuals when the art design is so strong, and *Ultimate*'s best monsters look spectacular on the big screen. We're eagerly anticipating the first proper HD entry, mind



Monaco: What's Yours Is Mine

Personalities are the real riches of any heist movie. Mr White, Daniel Ocean, Charlie Croker: you keep watching to see what happens to the rogues with a plan and a disrespect for the law. How fitting that personalities are also a key part of long-in-gestation 2010 IGF winner *Monaco*, a heist game that's far from shy about its cinematic reference points.

It starts with the characters, each one an archetype distilled into a power. The Locksmith can spring safes and doors in seconds, for instance; the Redhead is a femme fatale who can reduce a guard to a stupor. The story's told from more than one viewpoint, too, with radically different takes unlocked by clearing out levels.

Stealth and subterfuge are tools in your roll bag, but *Monaco*'s gameplay is bipolar, swinging from creeping to chaos. In singleplayer, or with a well-oiled team of up to four, you can orchestrate meticulous infiltrations. But as befits the genre, something will invariably go wrong – you open a door right into a tracking laser tripwire, say – and things descend into a tense scramble for a space to regroup. Making it even this far undetected relies on understanding the stylish but initially opaque top-down visuals, with what you can see drawn in blocks of colour, and what you can't in blueprint form.

Publisher Majesco Entertainment
Developer Pocketwatch Games
Format 360 (version tested), PC
Release Out now



SHOWTUNES
Composed by Grammy winner Austin Wintory, *Monaco*'s piano-heavy music flips from filmic, place-setting bars to frenzied ivory-tinkling madness. The latter does a lot to enhance the tension when you're scrabbling away at a lock as the guards close in, and the effects work is great – busting a power source and all the lights fizzling out is cochlea-tickling stuff. It adds up to a soundscape as rich as the Banque Albert before your band of misfits arrives.

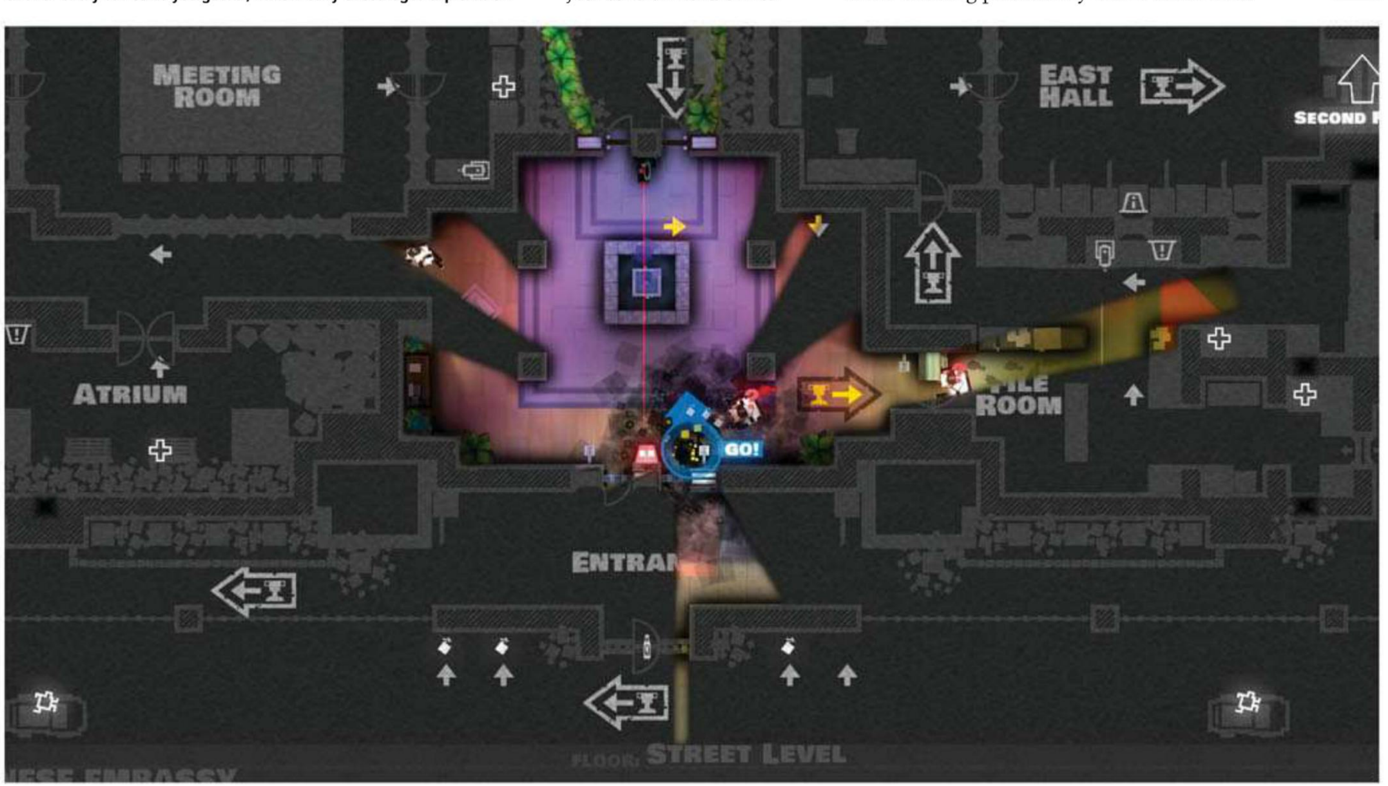
The other side of *Monaco* is carnage, a thrilling game of *Pac-Man*-meets-*Hotline Miami* played with the dumb guards as ghosts and coins as power pellets against a backdrop of gunshots. But there's an incentive to not rely solely on smash-and-grab tactics: in singleplayer, you get but a few short lives; in multiplayer, you'll need to rescue downed teammates before you can progress, which is brilliantly thematic but can grow tiresome.

It doesn't help that there are some legibility issues. Your health and ammo are hidden by default, revealed with a press of A as a ring around your thief. But both are needed often and A also brings up information that can obscure players in the top corners of the screen – about as useful as your mobile phone going off during a bank job. The characters aren't visually distinct enough to always tell apart, either. Nor can you move the map to scan a floor, robbing you of the ability to preplan.

It's a testament to this nervy, tactical game that such flaws can't spoil it. We kept on coming back to try new approaches, especially in the latter missions, which test you to your limits. There's a breadth of tools for the job – smoke bombs, shotguns, EMPs – and lots of freedom; Pocketwatch isn't afraid for you to crumble its levels to dust and carve your own path. It may not be the game of stealth the blueprints and lingo of red exclamation marks suggest, but *Monaco*'s loot and scoot play has a winning personality that's all its own.

8

BELOW Smoke bombs hide you from prying eyes temporarily, and they're just one of *Monaco*'s distinctive tools. Uses are rationed but increased by one for every ten coins you gather, which really encourages exploration



Sonic Dash

Publisher Sega
Developer In-house
Format iOS
Release Out now

Sonic The Hedgehog is known for two things: endless running and hoovering up gold rings. *Sonic Dash* is about two things: endless running and hoovering up your pound coins. Sega should be commended for belatedly entering the genre that is an obvious perfect fit for its mascot with a polished riff on *Temple Run*. It's unfortunate, however, that the team behind *Sonic Dash* hasn't done a better job of balancing the experience for players uninterested in paying more than the £1.49 entry fee.

Whether on the menu screen or in-game, you're rarely more than a few taps away from a prompt to make an in-app purchase for everything from new characters (you begin only with Sonic and need to amass some serious red coin currency to earn the next character in line, Tails) to the ability to continue after hitting a brick wall. It would be more excusable were it not for the frequency with which you'll need to resort to a Continue in *Sonic Dash* as you hop, slide and boost around a three-lane track, which frequently looks spectacular on current-gen Apple devices.

Gorgeous and silky smooth it may be, but the level design feels like it was made with in-app Continue purchases specifically in mind, hiding enemies cruelly behind obstacles, preventing the game from flowing and dazzling as it has the potential to. It's accomplished and beautiful, then, but *Sonic Dash* shows that, for Sega, learning from the competition comes at a price – one it's passed onto its fans.

5



Ridiculous Fishing

Publisher Vlambeer
Developer In-house
Format iOS
Release Out now

Is there something triumphant about the way Vlambeer's angular angler yanks his haul from the ocean, or does *Ridiculous Fishing*'s troubled gestation just make it feel that way? Dredged up from the murky depths of development hell with help from Zach Gage and Greg Wohlwend, it has, by happenstance, become the product of an indie supergroup, though the indulgence that term traditionally evokes is entirely absent. Nor does it feel like a game that almost finished the studio that made it after Gamenauts stole its thunder with shameless clone *Ninja Fishing*.

Ultimately, this is a simple little title, one modest in its ambitions. That isn't to say it's a minor release, merely that it's a much smaller game than the story surrounding it. You tilt to guide your hook as it descends and do the same to collect fish as it rapidly climbs, dodging the jellyfish that reduce the value of your catch. Dragging fish from the sea isn't enough; you only earn money by shooting them with ordnance that grows more powerful as your wallet fattens.

Said income can also be spent on upgrades that extend your line, or bladed lures that turn fish into chum on contact, a single finger powering it through the depths until you run out of fuel. Then, as a bazooka blasts an airborne shoal into fishy chunks, you sense a raised fist, or perhaps a defiant middle finger, extended in the direction of Gamenauts. Vlambeer's game is, as its title suggests, ridiculous. In its simple, gleeful rhythms of play, it's sublime, too.

9



Monster Meltdown

Publisher Ambient Studios
Developer In-house
Format iOS
Release Out now

Ambient's Kickstarter for *Death Inc* might have been unsuccessful, but based on the strength of this iPad title, we hope the studio finds the means to make its Black Death-themed RTS a reality. Both games share a pastel-coloured, wonky-lined art style that recalls Sackboy's homemade eccentricity, but while *Death Inc* promised open-ended simulation, *Monster Meltdown* is a tighter, more focused design.

It might look like a platformer, but Ambient has restricted protagonist Yuri's moveset to a single action: tap anywhere on the screen not shrouded in shadow and he teleports there. Tap on one of the monsters running amok through this futuristic lab, meanwhile, and Yuri swaps places with them. It's a simple control system that's entirely free from easily muddled gestures, and Ambient has built an intelligent puzzler around its limits.

Your main objective – corralling the monsters to the exit – is simple enough, sometimes as simple as swapping places at a level's outset. But *Monster Meltdown* adds both collectibles and rations the number of teleports for those in need of a more complex challenge. To begin with, you'll need them: Ambient takes a little too long in ramping up the complexity of its challenge, and it's only when new monster types and level furniture are introduced that the game will give seasoned players pause. Persevere, however, and you'll find the kind of charmingly intelligent design that makes us hope Ambient can eventually realise its grander ambitions.

7



create

Lifting the lid on the art, science and business of making games

This issue's People, Places, Things gets underway on p116, where we talk to indie developer Michael Brough, a man with a knack for subversion who wants to mess with your head. Lunacy is just one of the meanings ascribed to our Moon, and on p118 we discover how game designers have used this lump of lifeless rock to take us into the unknown. Coming back down to Earth, we chart the unpredictable nature of handguns in our medium on p120. Now *BioShock Infinite* has finally landed, the Boston-based Irrational Games is the focus of our Studio Profile on p122, where we discover how its grounded team works together to build castles in the sky. The Making Of... on p126 is focused on wringing emotion out of zombies in Telltale's *The Walking Dead*, which masterfully made us feel when other games would ask us to open fire. Meanwhile, The Art Of... on p130 goes for a spin with Sumo Digital through Sega's oeuvre as we take a look at the hard choices that informed *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed*. As the chequered flag falls, our columnists have the final say. Designer Tadhg Kelly (p134) says games won't eat themselves and Clint Hocking (p136) questions what makes a 'game' anyway. Randy Smith (p138) wants an older style of game back, one not based on big spectacle, and finds the current indie wave is ideally suited for scratching that itch. Finally, writer James Leach (p140) creeps himself (and us) out by wading into the dark corridors of the horror genre armed only with cynicism and self-loathing.





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Infinite, the much-anticipated sequel to *BioShock*, has proven that the commercial turning point for Irrational was no fluke. But how has success changed this one-time cult favourite? We find out on p122



People

MICHAEL BROUGH

This subversive indie talent wants to mess with your head

Just because many of Brough's games are high-concept doesn't mean he takes himself too seriously. The games he's made for jams are the funniest, including an inversion of *Passage*

When you meet game developer **Michael Brough** (it's pronounced to rhyme with frog), his timid demeanour might give the impression of a lifelong pacifist. It's surprising, then, to learn that he shot putted a computer off a first-floor balcony during his final year of high school back in New Zealand.

Brough's attack combo didn't end there. Unimpressed with the damage inflicted, he went in search of a sledgehammer. Then he blasted the machine's corpse with a blowtorch and dragged it around by its entrails. He concluded the exercise with a flourish to make the most seasoned of crime novelists swoon: painting a picture of his victim.

Even today, recounting the tale of his final high school art project elicits a mischievous chuckle from the 27-year-old developer. "I was very into the work of Dali, so I tried to imitate his stuff a bit," says Brough. "I guess it was a fascination with decay and destruction of technological artefacts. I think I still have similar ideas going through the stuff I'm making now, with my obsession with making things look like they're an error in the game – glitches and so on."

One of the games to which he's referring is *Corrypt*, which initially seems like a conventional *Sokoban* box-pushing puzzler with a few cosmetic oddities layered on top. The game's purple-headed protagonist encounters a crippled miner NPC who begs for help in settling a debt of seven mushrooms with some magicians who "do not accept delays". Like in *Super Mario Bros*, the speckled mushroom motif seems to quietly vindicate the surreal nature of the premise.

"Helix is going to be game of the year [in] whichever year [Brough] decides to put it out"

Corrypt has a devilish trick hidden up its sleeve, and waits till you've got to grips with the slightly counterintuitive box-pulling behaviour before uncorking it. About 15-20 minutes in, things take a bizarre turn. With barely concealed glee, Brough mentions getting a handful of polite but concerned messages from players reporting the same 'bug'. We won't say any more for fear of spoiling the epiphany.

"It feels like [early in the evolution of videogames] when something went wrong with a program, it was more likely something interesting would happen," says Brough when we cite the famous Minus World glitch in *Super Mario Bros*. "Whereas now you access the wrong memory, the operation will just crash, which is useful in many ways but also kind of sad. I'd like to make something where that kind of thing happens without my knowing, but I'm also interested in creating that as a kind of mythology as well."

Brough isn't shy about his fascination with the concept of the glitch. Indeed, the game he's most proud of making has the word built right into the title. *Glitch Tank* feels vaguely like chess, but complicates the mechanics by limiting players' moves to a set of replenishing cards. Every time you use a particular card – to rotate your tank, fire a shot, spawn a drone or a land mine, for example – a new random card appears to replace it. He and his wife continue to play *Glitch Tank* regularly. When asked if they keep a running tally of wins and losses, Brough laughs, "My wins get too high and she resets them. But when we play it in turn-based mode, we're pretty evenly matched. She crushes me at chess."

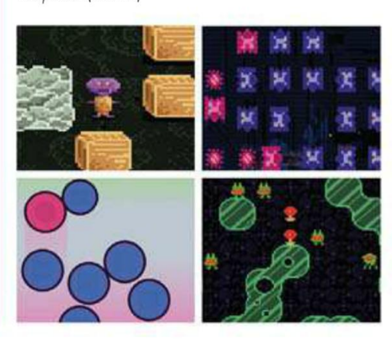
As it happens, chess provided a framework for some of Brough's earliest flirtations with game design. As a child, he tossed out the rules and fashioned his own. In a similar vein, he drew up his own boards for snakes and ladders variants and badgered his parents into playing them with him. "Sometimes they'd humour me and play, and I'm sure they were invariably terrible," he says. There were no dedicated game consoles in the house, just a computer, which seemed more palatable to Brough's parents because of its educational value.

Brough wouldn't be exposed to console classics such as *Super Mario Bros* until much later on in life, and he freely admits to being totally out of touch with the tastes of the 'average' gamer. He spent his college years modding *StarCraft* and playing boardgames. He still doesn't own a console and hasn't played a triple-A title in years. It goes a long way towards explaining why his game concepts feel so fresh, but it also puts him at a commercial disadvantage. Gamers enjoy griping about the lack of innovation in games, but sales figures paint a rather hypocritical picture.

After abandoning his pursuit of a PhD in mathematics at Queen Mary, University Of London ("I had quite a setback where something I'd thought was going to work out didn't and it all fell apart"), Brough's wife offered to cover the family's bills while he pursued game design. There remains a pressure to figure out how to make his work commercially sustainable, since his wife is only on a year-long contract with her employer.

CV

URL www.smestorp.com
Selected softography *Corrypt* (2012), *Glitch Tank* (2012), *O* (2012), *Zaga-33* (2012), *Vesper.5* (2012)



Based on the glowing praise for his upcoming game *Helix*, in which you dispatch enemies by tracing a full orbit around them, Brough may finally be on the verge of securing a broader fanbase. "*Helix* is going to be game of the year [in] whichever year [Michael] decides to make sound effects for it and put it out," tweeted fellow indie developer **Bennett Foddy** in late February.

"A few people who've played [*Helix*] – other game designers – have said to me: 'This is the one; this is the game that's going to make you successful,'" says Brough. "And that's very nice but… I find that confusing. Because it's not to my personal taste, [or] what I consider my best work. I think it's fairly conventional."

Brough has a punk-rock heart beneath his mellow exterior. Even his bulky pixel-art approach, which he adopted because it lets him get designs out faster, bears a whiff of The Ramones, whose lack of technical fussiness on their instruments gave their message an increased sense of urgency.

Brough particularly values subversion in games. He wants to challenges players' intellect and their preconceptions. He once mentioned that he aims for a seven out of ten score with his games, which he likes to interpret as the reviewer enjoying herself but having been made just uncomfortable enough to withhold a more enthusiastic endorsement. Brough insists he's not simply trolling, however. He enjoys bewildering players because he's fascinated with how they naturally leverage the scientific method to get their bearings in the wake of such confusion.

"I've seen people [go around bumping into every wall] in *Corrypt* because they see the mushrooms in the walls, and they're like, 'Surely I can get there.' Yes, you can get there, but not by such a boring way." ■



Places

THE MOON

This bewitching celestial body has long cast its spell on games

Harking back to *Moon Patrol*, *Mass Effect*'s six-wheeled Mako is used to roam lunar surfaces and also has a floaty jump. Its sluggish controls made it unpopular, though

The Moon hung in our night skies for billions of years before humanity ever set foot on it, building up a silvery patina of meanings and dreams. It's the friend of the traveller and the enemy of thieves; it's a token of romance and of lunacy. It's a man, a rabbit, associated with the deities Artemis and Selene, a cold stone turning insensately in space. It's thought to have formed when a collision with another celestial body broke it off from a young Earth and hurled it into synchronous orbit. No wonder we feel it to be part of our domain, even though only 12 people have ever set foot there. It influences our bodily cycles, tides, calendars and arts. Videogames, born at the height of the space race, have keenly felt this gentle but inexorable pull.

Armed with a new way to take us places we couldn't otherwise go, pioneering developers gravitated upward. It didn't hurt that the darkness and sparseness of space made it an ideal subject for simple raster graphics. In one of the earliest games, 1962's *Spacewar!*, the white outlines of two spaceships exchange tiny bullets while trying not to get sucked into an asterisk. Nearly a decade later, the future founders of Atari turned it into the first commercially available coin-op videogame, *Computer Space*, and space games would proliferate throughout the '70s. But *Lunar Lander* was one of the first to take us to the surface of the Moon. Based on a tech demo for the DEC GT40 graphics terminal, it was released in arcades in '79. Its vector graphics – similar to the more frenetic *Asteroids* – depict the Moon as a craggy contour line on a black screen on which you search for a flat place to land.

Games have more often used the Moon the way sci-fi writers have: as a blank slate for all kinds of fantasy

Of course, in the case of *Lunar Lander*, you could easily replace the landing module with a parachutist and read the terrain as mountains without adverse effect. But across the '80s and beyond, as graphical and physics capabilities grew, the Moon was deeply mined for its properties as a setting. Its pitted surface became a medium rather than a goalpost in 1982 arcade classic *Moon Patrol*. On its six-wheeled purple buggy, three visible tyres tightly grip the bumpy ground, which gives the driving a sense of weight quite different to gliding on paved roads.

In one of the earliest examples of designers using the Moon as more than just a convenient backdrop, the buggy also has a floaty jump that carries it over deep pocks in the lunar terrain. The extra hang time is not only appropriate, it has major design ramifications. It allows the rhythm of the game to be fast-paced and exciting without getting too hard, adding a lenient margin of error to the timing of jumps – useful when you're also worrying about UFOs overhead. And designers soon explored other ways to exploit reduced gravity, whether basing entire games on it or using it for contrast. In *Metroid*, Samus Aran's dreamy leaps enhance the lofty sense of scale and help the player feel the otherworldly nature of the place. Jumping high and slow in space became such a common idea that games from *Super Mario 64* and *Banjo-Kazooie* to *Tony Hawk* and *Minecraft* all include secret Moon Jump cheat codes.

The added bounciness mechanic, empowering the player to reach impossibly high points, reaches its epitome in *Super Mario Galaxy*, where Mario caroms from planet to planet. But there are plenty of games that have taken the idea in different directions. The Jules Verne-inspired point-and-click adventure *Journey To The Moon* asks the player, alongside deciphering the Moon's language and cataloguing its flora, to play a minigame about catching bubbles in a low-gravity environment. In FPS *Shattered Horizon*, the player battles in a zero-g environment strewn with debris flung from an explosion on the Moon. Low gravity works against you in 1996 DOS racer *Big Red Racing*, where the reduced traction of the Lunar Loops track increases, not buffers, the difficulty.



The moon in *Majora's Mask* is a terrifying reminder of the ticking clock, and effectively builds a sense of impending apocalypse

Other than a stray flag or two, our real Moon is a stubbornly black and white, and deserted. Outside of the NASA educational simulator *Moonbase Alpha*, game designers have more often used it the way science fiction writers have: as a blank slate for projecting all kinds of fantasies, many of a Cold War vintage (see the underground hatches of DS title *Moon* and the Soviet moonbase in *Destroy All Humans! 2*). In *Portal 2*, the surface is made of poisonous rocks, which can be ground up into a conversion gel. In *DuckTales*, which contains perhaps the definitive 8bit Moon level, Uncle Scrooge goes pogoing through an alien base, sans spacesuit, searching for the Green Cheese Of Longevity. The Moon of our imagination is often a sinister place, providing refuge for the likes of Sonic's nemesis Dr Robotnik when not threatening to crush the world outright, as in *The Legend Of Zelda: Majora's Mask*.

But the subtlest way that designers have used the Moon is to blow out established scale and provide a sense of grandeur, even transgression. *Final Fantasy IV*'s Moon was practical, grey and cratered, but wondrous after so much green overworld. The Lunar Whale voyage was so mind-blowing because it ripped through the conventions of fantasy RPGs, where moons usually hovered inaccessibly in painted skies. These days, the technology and ingenuity of game designers takes us much further, but as narrative devices go, the Moon is a case where getting there – closing the gap between the known and the unknown – is at least as important as arriving. ■



Things

HANDGUNS

Why is gaming's most common weapon so ambiguous?

Is *Fallout 3*'s Wild Bill's Sidearm a powerful weapon compared to rifles or shotguns? You won't have a clue until you look at its statistics

A handgun and shotgun lie before you, dropped by the two guards you killed with your assault rifle's last bullets. Which will you pick up? The shotgun's attractions are obvious. You haven't played this game much yet, but you can be pretty sure it will deliver powerful and wide short-range blasts at a low rate of fire. It's perfect for crowd control and one-shot close kills, if that's what you're into. The handgun, though? Its abilities are pretty much impossible to gauge at first sight.

The handgun occupies a strange place in the videogame armoury. Other trusty regulars brandish their intents and roles clearly. The assault rifle? It's a stalwart, unwieldy at close range, but accurate at medium range, delivering a rapid flurry of bullets. The sniper rifle? It offers hugely damaging and highly accurate single shots. The shotgun, the rocket launcher – game after game has reinforced the roles of a set of weapons into a near-universal grammar of conflict, their identity unchanging across accurate military simulations and breezy shoot 'em ups, in thirdperson and first-, in Vietnam's jungles or on the surface of Phobos.

That handgun lying at your feet, though, what will it be good for? It might be a pop gun, a standby supported by plentiful dropped ammunition, but oh so weak, firing frustratingly slowly, with little impact and barely on-target. *Doom*'s pistol, in other words: the weapon you only use when you've run out of shotgun shells. But it could equally be a punchy headshot monster, terrifyingly accurate with a zoom, capable of firing over three times in a second. That would place it in a class with *Halo: Combat Evolved*'s notorious but much-loved Magnum, or the slower-firing .357 Magnum of *Half-Life*, which can drop most enemies in a single shot.

The pop gun and the puncher: two completely different concepts for game guns in the same compact package. But neither really lives up to what a handgun is in reality. In our world, handguns readily cause horrific injuries to their targets. Their rounds generally penetrate at least as deeply as most internal organs, and one of the commonest ammunition types is jacketed hollow point, which expands on impact, increasing the chances of hitting something vital. So they're not exactly the weak standby you find in *Doom*, but they also hardly deliver the deadly precision of *Halo*'s Magnum. The standard handgun's lack of



***Call Of Duty*'s akimbo Desert Eagles are unlocked at high level, befitting their incredible damage output – two shots for a kill**

a stock makes it hard to aim and susceptible to recoil, and its short barrel makes it inaccurate at medium range and beyond.

Perhaps the most realistic depiction of a handgun's role among a soldier's arms is in *Call Of Duty*, where it's a sidearm, a backup weapon that, should you have expended your clip in your main weapon, is faster to switch to and use than reloading. Game weapons need never adhere to reality, of course, but this idea plays with the relationship between authenticity and game design well by using the sidearm concept to introduce a little strategy and extra involvement to your weapon handling. Do you leave yourself open by reloading or switch to the less effective backup?

Among all of Borderlands' vast array of outlandish weapons, its handguns are the most surprising

Outside outliers like this, other weapons in games – the shotgun, the rifle – tend to bear a closer relationship with their real-world counterparts than the handgun, and stick with their general designs with greater continuity. And they're not boring for it. A consistent identity helps you to instantly understand what a weapon's good for, and that's a good thing on a roiling battlefield. Is it fun to have to dither over assessing a new weapon's basic function when you're probably more anxious to lay down fire?

But consider some of the videogame handgun's more exotic variants. There are silenced pistols, which enable the stealth modes of many games, such as *GoldenEye 007* and *Splinter Cell*, their restricted magazines and lack of sights adding tension to the methodical pursuit of headshots. There are burst-fire modes and mounted scopes, stocks and extended magazines: the kinds of upgrades that *Resident Evil 4* offered for its hugely varied set of handguns, from the reliable Red 9 to the heart-stopping Broken Butterfly. The former in particular transforms from being dependable to your pinpoint weapon of choice once you have its stock and have upgraded its firepower, which can exceed that of the game's low-level shotguns. With its ammunition the commonest in the game, the Red 9 is many *Resident Evil 4* players' most important weapon.

Borderlands 2 stretches the concept of the handgun to its limit, and possibly beyond. Here, a handgun might be a mini-SMG, with rapid automatic fire and a vast clip size, like Bandit Ratataters. Or they might be thunderous six-shooters, such as Jakob Widow Makers. Or they might dole out accurate, scoped burst-fire rounds, like Hyperion Visions. Among all of *Borderlands*' vast array of outlandish weapons, its handguns are the most surprising and diverse.

The way videogames like *Borderlands* have it, the handgun is all guns in one. And while this can lead to an uneasy sense of unfamiliarity, it also gives the handgun a sense of mystery and possibility. How will it expand on the principle of launching a projectile along a barrel with a contained explosion? When the rules are open, there's more to explore and a greater sense of possibility. So which do you pick up? The shotgun has many ready charms, but there's probably more adventure in going for that handgun. ■



STUDIO PROFILE

Irrational Games

How a critical darling avoided buckling under commercial pressures and stayed true to its storytelling ideals

1 RPG *Freedom Force* focuses on a diverse roster of four-colour superheroes. 2 *BioShock* was Irrational's breakthrough success, with its exploration of Randist ideals. 3 *System Shock 2* was praised for its atmosphere. 4 *SWAT 4* encourages the use of non-lethal force. 5 *Bioshock Infinite* is a tale of companionship and zealots



Founded 1997
Employees 100 (approx)
Key staff Ken Levine (creative director, co-founder), Shawn Robertson (animation director), Drew Holmes (lead writer)
URL www.irrationalgames.com
Selected softography *System Shock 2, Freedom Force, SWAT 4, BioShock*
Current projects *BioShock Infinite*

BioShock Infinite has just gone gold. It's February 19, and outside it's a frigidly cold morning on America's East Coast. Sheltered from the elements, we're speaking with **Ken Levine** in a dimly lit meeting room deep inside his studio's Boston HQ. Rather than bask in the satisfying knowledge that five years of developmental graft are finally at an end, the Irrational Games co-founder and creative director is focused on the future. "If we have a mission," he explains, "it's to figure out how to integrate gameplay and narrative so it's one consistent experience, and to make the player a participant in the narrative and not an observer."

A quick glance at Levine's CV will tell you this is a philosophy he has carried throughout his career. And if you've played *Thief*, *System Shock 2* or the original *BioShock*, you'll have experienced that storytelling bent first-hand. Speaking with his colleagues, it's an ethos that seems to have bled into the very foundations of Irrational's working process, too. For starters, it has forced an intense level of communication within the studio.

"There's a lot of collaboration," says writer **Drew Holmes**. "Everything tends to start with the script, and then we bring in the other departments, make sure their feedback is heard and that they are a part of this creative process. There's a sense of narrative being just as much a part of the design as everything else. It's not all about writing through dialogue. We put a lot of work into telling stories in the environment – making sure a store is telling a story, a character doing a simple animation is telling a story."

This level of departmental collaboration can be traced back to early development work on the first *BioShock*. The results are evident in the game, where the visuals and audio play as large a role in the storytelling as the dialogue itself. What's more, its setting – the now infamously twisted subterranean dystopia of Rapture – is, in a sense, as much of a lead character as the game's silent protagonist, Jack. *BioShock*'s storytelling focus had ramifications beyond the game world, however: it physically altered the layout of Irrational's studio and affected its working practices.

"Early on in *BioShock*," recalls animation director **Shawn Robertson**, "all the artists sat together, all the animators sat together and we realised you're just creating these fiefdoms where everybody is worried about what they're working on. You've got to promote the idea that games are a collaborative effort, and one of the early experiments we did was to take an animator, a designer and a programmer and put them all next to each other. You have this environment where if you have an idea – you want an AI to do something – you have the designer who can start working on that system, you have the programmer who can enable it and you have the animator who can represent it, and they can all bang out something in a day and see if it's going to work or not."



***BioShock*'s signature diving-suited menace and charge guard Irrational's HQ in Quincy, Massachusetts, a part of Boston**

The experiment stuck. Stepping outside of the meeting room with Levine, Irrational's moodily lit workspace unravels in front of us. It's a sprawling open-plan hub of artists, designers, writers and programmers, all with grand creative ambitions. The setup sounds equally grand, but how does it really work?

> "We had this idea of combining shooting with RPG [elements] to sweep under the rug its failings"

"I can stand up from my desk," says Holmes, "walk 20 feet down the hall and sit at an animator's desk and be like, 'Here's what I was thinking for this, can we bang something out?' The speed at which this company moves is not like anything I've seen before – it's staggering. The level of iteration we tend to do here at Irrational is not really seen at any other company, certainly not at the company I was previously at, Volition."

Rewind 15 years, however, to when a trio of ambitious coworkers, namely Jonathan Chey, Robert Fermier and Ken Levine, broke away from Looking Glass Studios to form Irrational, and it transpires that guiding philosophy of fusing narrative and gameplay was born partly out of necessity. "We got the opportunity – complete chance and luck – to make, for our first game, the sequel to one of my favourite games of all time, *System Shock*. It was remarkable," says Levine.

But immediately the studio, an outfit far from the distinguished name of today and taking its first baby steps into full-time independent development, was faced with a momentous challenge. And not simply because of the obvious pressure that came with making the follow-up to such an influential and critically acclaimed shooter. "We sat back and looked at what we had, which was this engine, the Dark Engine, which *Thief* was made on," Levine explains. "We looked at *System Shock*, which was a shooter, and said 'Oh man, these things don't really go together. This engine is not designed for high-action sequences, it's designed for a stealth game.'"

The answer? Strip the game of its shooter core and turn it into a narrative-led action-RPG – a far more viable project for Irrational given the technology available. "We knew our shooting wasn't going to be as good as *System Shock*," admits Levine. "We looked at our budget and our resources and had this idea of combining shooting with RPG [elements] as a way to sweep under the rug the failings of the shooting."

Navigating the constraints of tight budgets and outdated engines, the burgeoning team at Irrational infused *System Shock 2* with "a mood and a vibe", as Levine succinctly puts it. This was something that would become apparent in an early prototype that Levine recalls as being one of his fondest memories of the project.

"It was basically a demonstration of the shooting and RPG stuff, and it really was *cool*," he explains, an enthusiastic grin spreading across his face. "I remember playing it and it was not functional in any way, shape or form – it barely held together. We had no AI. We had things that pretended to be AI. We had lots of things that pretended to be things, but there was no real anything. But we really tried to tell a story in this space with the limited tools we had and I remember finishing it and thinking, 'Wow, we created something that has an emotional feel to it.' It was powerful to me as a setting, sort of a





BioShock Infinite (left, reviewed on p90) explores political isolationism and the effects of radical religious fervour on a population. Freedom Force's Minuteman (above) embodies a different take on the US, being a staunch patriot and a direct parallel to Captain America

vision of my future as a game developer encapsulated in this demo."

Fortunately for the studio, *System Shock 2*'s roleplaying leanings were a hit with critics; 90 per cent or greater scores abounded (as well as eight out of ten in **E**77). "We were as stunned as anybody else as to it getting the reaction it did from the press," admits Levine. "I think we expected the critical reaction to be on par with the commercial reaction, which was tepid."

And therein lay a hard truth for Irrational. Although *System Shock 2* spawned a dedicated fanbase that thrives even now (mods are still being cobbled together that improve the game's graphical fidelity and overall performance), the game failed to ignite the sales chart, crossing the 50,000 copies sold mark around six months after release.

It would be eight years before the studio produced a title that was truly commercially successful, despite working on well-liked and critically praised games such as *SWAT 4* and *Freedom Force Vs The 3rd Reich* in that period. Yet despite the sudden influx of capital and obvious physical growth of the company that it brought, the success of *BioShock* changed Irrational's work ethic surprisingly little.

"We have people who are committed – it's no magic formula. People have to be really good"

"All of a sudden, I was the cool dad, for sure!" jokes Robertson. "It was great to go from the critical darlings – everybody loved our games but nobody bought them – to finally having a game that was critically successful but also financially successful, which gave us the freedom to do what we wanted with *BioShock Infinite*."

"It didn't change the old timers so much," Levine explains, "because we all have the 'fat kid' syndrome – like we're the unpopular kid in school – and I think we're always going to feel that way. But I think it changed the people who were coming here. [They came] with a different perception of what the company was, thinking there was a certain way to make a *BioShock* game and that we knew how to do it, like a formula. I think a lot of them were surprised when they realised we were just figuring it out as we went along. We don't trust formulas, because we haven't found them reliable and I think we're most comfortable when we're most uncomfortable."

Ironically, it seems that the comparative financial stability secured after *BioShock* has only encouraged Irrational's appetite for creative risk taking, and for furthering its ever-present goal of "telling the best stories we can in videogames", as Robertson puts it. "I don't think I've ever been comfortable in a day of work at Irrational. I almost feel like if I come to work and I'm comfortable and confident that what we're doing is going to be successful then it feels weird."

Holmes echoes his sentiments: "What's safe isn't interesting to us. Something that scares us to death, that's what we want to work on."

And while work on *Infinite* was conducted over the relative safety net of the *BioShock* name, Irrational's culture of seemingly perpetual iteration – "Don't be afraid to kill your babies!" says Holmes – must have been a challenging practice for some at the studio. We're reminded of the mini staff exodus that occurred towards the tail end of 2012 as development on *Infinite* was nearing its completion, although Levine bats away our suggestions this had anything to do with the company's iterative approach. "It was a mix of people leaving and people being asked to leave. I don't think it's different than at any other studio and it always surprises me that we've had so much attention on it. That said, I think [Irrational] is an environment where we expect a lot out of people. We make good games because we have good people, we have people who are committed – it's no magic formula. People have to be really good."

They're also encouraged to contribute ideas, many of which helped flavour the narrative of *BioShock Infinite*, ideas that evolve through regular brainstorming meetings between the team. Because Levine – although resolute in his demand for excellence – is no dictator, preferring to guide his team's creative flow rather than control it. "You can always come to him with ideas," explains Robertson. "Ken is one of those guys who can make you look at your work in ways that you never thought about looking at it. From a creative standpoint, you can bring him something and think you've got all your bases covered and Ken can always turn it on its edge – in a good way – and make you see another facet of it."

"Ken is challenging in the best possible way," agrees Holmes. "We're a company that is not afraid to fail. Try it, see if it works; if it doesn't, now you know what not to do. That's the way we operate with Ken. We demand excellence of one another, and that's a hard thing to do. It takes a lot of time and effort, but I think everyone understands what the goal is – to push narrative in videogames forward."

It's a goal that has been at the heart of Irrational for 15 years, and the rock around which the fluctuating tides of commercial success have ebbed and flowed. But whether or not *Infinite* will share the same level of success – commercially and critically – as its illustrious predecessor, Levine is still unsure. "I think there's extremely challenging content in the game. There's a lot of ambition and if you leap high, there's always that chance you could fall right on your face. If I look back on this game, I'll judge it as a piece of artistic endeavour; I'll judge it based upon what I viewed as my goals for the game, which was to advance the integration of the narrative experience – putting the player into the narrative experience rather than observing."

And regardless of how *BioShock Infinite* performs, it's clear that Irrational will take that goal with it into the future and the next generation of console hardware. "We have a very strong team and lots of talented people," says Robertson, "and I'm looking forward to discovering the next big story we're going to tell." ■



Ken Levine
Creative director and co-founder, Irrational Games

A former employee of Looking Glass Studios, Ken Levine's CV is packed with cult hits such as *Thief* and *System Shock 2*. Levine formed Irrational Games in 1997 with Jonathan Chey and Robert Fermier. We discuss with Ken how much a game can change over the course of a development cycle.

How do you come up with your ideas? Do you all sit together and brainstorm?
The first day of working on *BioShock Infinite*, we called a lot of the senior members into a room and said, 'Well, we've been working on this prototype for something and we're not very happy with it. What should we do?' And somebody said 'What about another *BioShock* game?' We all rolled our eyes because we'd already decided not to do that. Then somebody said, 'What if it wasn't in Rapture? What if it was something completely different?' And we thought, 'But isn't *BioShock* Rapture?' But the more we thought about it, the more we realised it wasn't Rapture. The more we talked, the more we realised it was about this sort of narrative mission we were on.

How did you decide on a floating city then?
Once you realise everything else was secondary we thought, 'What about turn of the century?' And then we went on the Internet and looked at pieces of art and we kept seeing floating cities, floating cities, floating cities. Very fantastical floating cities – it seemed to be a meme at the time in science fiction and we all tuned into that right away. That was the last day we decided on something and stuck with it for the entire game!

So how much did the game change from that original concept?
It looked completely different. It was much more like *BioShock* – tighter corridors, you'd catch an occasional glimpse of sky, and the colour palette was very dark and muted and full of greens and oranges and purples.

What prompted the transition to the Columbia we see in the game today?
I remember really struggling with the visual, and I went for a run one day – it was in June, one of those beautiful New England summer days, the sun's coming down, the sky is completely blue, the flowers are out... I remember looking at this mailbox and seeing the sun play along it. I took out my iPhone and I filmed the play of the light on the mailbox. It was weird and nerdy, but I did, and I'm sure if the owners of the house had seen me they'd have come out with a shotgun, but it reminded me of being a kid and being at July fourth picnics, and it brought me back to a memory. I started thinking about Columbia as America. Not as it ever really was, but as politicians remember it to be – as this ideal vision of blue skies, puffy clouds, hummingbirds, bees buzzing, the flowers, and that *light*, that powerful sunlight. [It] all came together and I came in the next day and was just like, 'It's the ideal forth of July picnic, that's what the city looks like.' And we started working from there.





The studio is built around making collaboration simpler, with artists, programmers and designers deliberately placed together instead of segregated



THE MAKING OF...

The Walking Dead

How Telltale Games made a zombie adventure more interested in getting at your heart than your brains

The Walking Dead's central relationship asks you to keep a little girl safe – not just physically but psychologically. It's an emotional escort mission that grounds the gameplay

Format 360, iOS, PC, PS3
Publisher Telltale Games
Developer In-house
Origin US
Debut 2012

Zombies are many things. They're monsters, they're us, and they haunt our waking nightmares in every medium around. They can be scary, they can be funny, but they're rarely known for reducing adults to tears. Yet that is exactly how The Walking Dead's creator, **Robert Kirkman**, uses them. However, if you don't want to know exactly how he uses them for fear of spoiling his tale for yourself then now's the time to look away.

"I have a thing I like to say about The Walking Dead," Kirkman tells us. "It's an emotional story and the ultimate goal is always to see if I can make readers cry. I love the idea of people reading what is traditionally an action-oriented, gory genre and finding something really heartfelt and character driven."

When Kirkman first met with Telltale Games in late 2010, he told the team his theory of what makes his crossmedia zombie epic so successful. "He said, 'I don't know why no one else has copied this, but The Walking Dead is really just a bunch of people hugging and crying and shit…'" remembers co-project lead **Jake Rodkin**.

It's a self-deprecating comment, but within it lies a kernel of truth. "It's just his way of saying 'Aw, shucks, there's really not that much to it,'" believes **Gary Whitta**, story consultant on Telltale's *The Walking Dead*. "For Robert, the zombie apocalypse is really just a framework for creating extreme parameters of human drama. It's a cauldron where people get thrown in and pushed to the limits of their psychological extremes."

But how do you make that into a game? Steven Spielberg once said games would be art when players cried on level 17, but the truth is that the majority of high-profile games don't offer a broad palette of emotional experiences beyond thrills and shocks.

At best, Kirkman hoped that Telltale might elicit a few tears from players. What he didn't expect was that this future winner of 80-plus game of the year awards would become a benchmark for storytelling in games. Nor did he guess it would reduce grown men to weeping, wailing, blubbering wrecks on YouTube.

But Telltale Games' selling point isn't just telling tales, even emotionally resonant ones, it's putting players at the centre of them. "Telltale's mission – that you're actually going to play the story – is a very rare mission in this business," says co-project lead **Sean Vanaman**.

"It's an emotional story and the ultimate goal is always to see if I can make readers cry"

"In an adventure game, you're playing all the character and story elements that, in an action game, would traditionally be in a cutscene. I think the mission of Telltale Games as a company is [to ask], 'How do you play these moments that are traditionally relegated to the in-between, very static, prerendered cutscenes of other games?' Playing a story versus having a story told to you is where it breaks down [for] us."

Over the past nine years, Telltale has tried to evolve the gameplay systems of the adventure games of the '90s. *Jurassic Park*, released in 2011, was the most ambitious game in the company's history and for it the studio upgraded its proprietary Telltale Tool engine so it could cope with quick-response movements and complicated rendering. But *Jurassic Park*'s reception was underwhelming and there were those who wondered aloud if the point-and-click adventure game was dead on its feet.

The Walking Dead changed all that. It opens with protagonist Lee Everett on his way to jail, convicted of a crime of passion, until the zombie apocalypse is unleashed. It's a quick transition, and in the first 15 minutes you'll have escaped from a crashed cop car, killed the soon-zombified officer who was driving you to the lockup, and dodged a pack of ghouls by taking shelter in a nearby house. It's there you meet Clementine, the baseball-capped eight-year-old who becomes Lee's charge for the rest of the five-episode opening season.

What's noticeable right from the start is how carefully the game balances story, gameplay and dialogue trees. "It's important to develop gameplay modes that are at the service of your theme," explains Vanaman. "We paired a writer up with a designer on every episode so that both plot conception and gameplay conception are happening in a writer's brain and a designer's brain. Otherwise you can fall into telling a non-interactive story really easily."

In the first episode, Lee's panicked attempts to kill Clementine's zombie babysitter with a kick to the head repeatedly end in failure until you realise that you can take a hammer from the young girl to bash the undead's skull in. Pairing a tense gaming sequence with character development – Clem is consistently resourceful beyond her years – this moment encapsulates the game's careful pairing of gameplay mechanics and storytelling.

This design principle ultimately forced Telltale to leave several of its dearest ideas to rot. For instance, a "shithouse-crazy shooting scene where everybody in your crew was unloading all of their guns at the same time into a wall of zombies", in Vanaman's words, didn't make the cut. Because the shooting mechanic was torn between discrete success and failure, it couldn't capture the sense of panic the designers were looking for. "You have to think about that sort of stuff as a storyteller in videogames. You have to think about the types of mechanics you have at your disposal and what types of moment they allow you to create."

The Walking Dead isn't a game about guns. It's arguably not even about zombies. Instead, its core is emotion, morality and player choice. Everett's journey is an escort mission that doesn't simply ask you to keep Clementine physically safe, but poses questions about her psychological wellbeing while she's in your care. An emotional escort mission, perhaps. Your decisions matter to her, and what you choose ultimately defines how good a man Lee turns out to be. But unlike most games, there is no binary split between 'right' and 'wrong'.

"It sounds like a marketing catchphrase, but the idea that there is no right or wrong choice was a guiding factor for us from the very beginning of the design of the game," explains Rodkin. "The challenge was making players do something that they know has a cost and has risk, but then making them also feel OK with that decision and OK with experiencing the rest of the story and seeing the result of that."

The key was to avoid making the player feel punished and thus stop them being tempted to rewind to a previous save to make the decision again. "All choices are equally wrong," says Whitta with a mischievous chuckle.

Telltale also tracked the decisions players made, crunching the data to provide an overview of how your peers responded to the tough choices in each episode. Since the instalments were in live development during the first season's nine-month release schedule, it meant the team could also react to players' choices. What surprised the team wasn't so much which decisions players made as why they made them.

"What's fascinating is how players contextualise them," says Vanaman. "My mom and my sister are in a feud over the last choice they made in the game. They both feel really ideological about it and believe that they did the best thing for Clementine in a really profound way. It's not so much about, 'Oh, did you drop Ben in the bell tower or not?' It's more like, 'Why

did you do that? And what emotionally compelled you, in those five seconds before you had to choose, to go the way that you did?' That's the thing that's really interesting about the game."

There's no right choice, of course, but that doesn't mean your decisions have a huge impact on the overarching path the story takes. There is, for example, no ending in which Clem dies. Rather, what you do defines how other characters see you and who lives in the supporting cast.

On a first playthrough, none of this is obvious. As in all good fiction, the player's imagination does a lot of the heavy lifting. "Not necessarily everything that the player considered is going to happen in the game," says Whitta, referencing the moment in episode four when you must decide whether to take Clementine to Crawford or not.

"People were worried that if they left her at the house, she wouldn't be there when they came back. Now, the reality is that the way the game is designed that's not something that can actually happen. All you need to do is create the illusion that it is something that could happen and it becomes something that will weigh on the player's mind when they make the choice."

Like stage magic, the suspension of disbelief is key. A second playthrough reveals the gears driving the story under the game's hood and runs the risk of spoiling the show. It's an inevitable downside of trying to convince players they have autonomy within a predetermined narrative.

"If people start being able to see the machinations, the goings on behind the curtain, then we'll have to adapt," says Vanaman. "Preserving the genuine feeling of 'What the hell do I do?' when you come to one of these moments [of choice] is paramount for the success of the game. I don't know if the solution is necessarily making the narrative branch a million times, but preserving that suspension of disbelief and preserving the real genuine intensity of those dramatic moments is the focus."

Player choice only has an impact if we are concerned about the wellbeing of the characters our decisions effect. What makes *The Walking Dead* so successful is its ability to make us care. In part, that's thanks to Telltale's art and animation teams, who brought these characters to life.

With their big eyes and asymmetrical features, the characters may lack realism but they have a definite humanity. "We asked Derek [Sakai, the art director] to make sure that no facial expressions were symmetrical from left to right," recalls Rodkin. "There is never a point where both eyebrows on a character's face raise by the same amount; when they get angry, the mouth always has a snarl on one side. We used that as a shorthand way to make it feel like there was more detail and more subtlety going on all the time."

While Lee is the character you expect to identify with as the hero, it was Clementine who stole hearts. "Everybody at Telltale was just blown away by the degree to which players responded emotionally to Clementine," says Whitta.

"It comes down to the idea that she is this one little gem of hope in a hopeless world. People really did relate to her almost like she was real. They weren't roleplaying. Clementine was emotionally real for them. She became this virtual surrogate daughter that they wanted to protect. It wasn't just enough just to shield her physically and prevent any harm coming to her, they also wanted to shield her emotionally."

The casting process for her was arduous: Telltale auditioned a hundred actors – from young girls to adult women – to find her voice. But it was worth it. "She is the number one reason why players are making the choices they are making," says Vanaman. "In a story that's got hopelessness at its core, you need Clementine. It would be a very different story without her."

After auditioning so many actors, though, he began to think they'd set themselves an impossible task. "You start to wonder if Dame Judi Dench was sitting there [and] trying to do this character because it was written for her, if she would be screwing it up because you screwed up, because it's not good at its core," Vanaman says. Then voice actor and Telltale regular Melissa Hutchison came in to read. "She just was the character. We were like, 'Oh, there she is. She's alive now.'"

Q&A

Melissa Hutchison
Voice actor, Clementine

Can you tell us about the recording sessions?
They were a blast! Even though the content is serious, we still had so much fun in the studio. The recording process for most videogames is a funny one in that you record all the dialogue solo. I didn't even meet Dave Fennoy [who plays Lee] till episode three.

Why have people responded to Clem so well?
I think the amazing writing and character development play the most important role in the success of Clementine. Writing a child into a videogame, especially as a main character, is risky. You have to take care that the kid doesn't come off as annoying or people will be repelled from playing the game. Clementine is smart and helpful and kind. The player is drawn to her, and therefore makes an emotional investment.

We heard you cried in the booth. Why?
Two words: episode five. I had a lot of time to bond with this character. I was heartbroken that little Clem had to say goodbye to her Lee! The final scene between Lee and Clem was very intense to record. I had no problem conjuring up tears. The emotion was very real and heartfelt. I have to say, it gives me great pleasure when I get feedback from fans of the game saying they shed tears as well. It makes me feel like [a] job well done!

At his keynote speech at DICE this year, Telltale co-founder and CEO Dan Connors beefed up his presentation with clips from YouTube Let's Play videos. Players Morfar, PewDiePie and others weeped, raged and despaired as *The Walking Dead*'s first season reached its climax.

Serialised stories have a long history of creating such emotion. Back in 1841, US fans of Dickens crowded into a New York harbour to hear news of Little Nell in the latest instalment of The Old Curiosity Shop. Telltale, which had a near-revolt on its hands after delays hit the schedule, know how high passions can run.

Yet the episodic release schedule has been a huge part of *The Walking Dead*'s success as an event as well as a videogame. "You get these multiple bites of the apple and you sustain the conversation about your game over an entire year, not just over the release window of a $60 game," Whitta says, comparing it to a TV show such as Mad Men. With its BAFTA Award for Best Story and more than 8.5 million downloads, it's not hard to see his point.

But what about Kirkman? The man who asked Telltale to make gamers sad first saw the game in an early build and played 15 minutes from the middle of the first episode. "It was such a bleak, weird mess at the time," says Vanaman. "I just remember him being like 'Um, OK… Er, OK…' To be perfectly honest, his response was just this sort of befuddlement, which is sort of the same thing you'd get if you picked up his comics in the book store and didn't really settle down with them. It's so hard to get in a short burst."

Later, when it neared release, Telltale sat Kirkman down again with a finished build. This time, his response was less perplexed. "He just turned to us and said: 'Holy shit guys, you did it,'" says Rodkin. "That was really the most fulfilling to hear." Did the creator of The Walking Dead have tears in his eyes? Telltale isn't telling. ■






Clem's home and backyard (left) is one of the first environments we get to explore. Her decision to hide in a tree house is an early indication that she's a smart and capable survivor. Concept art for the motel (right) where Lee and the survivors regroup showcases the apocalyptic backdrop



The dead walk

Zombies never have it easy, particularly in videogames, but the flesh-craving monsters in Telltale's *The Walking Dead* have a lot to moan about. While everyone's talking about choice, Clementine and emotional resonance, it's easy to overlook just how well realised the game's shambling, pale-faced corpses are. "We knew there were going to be hordes of zombies, the faceless shambling group," says Sean Vanaman. "It was important for us to have zombies that had a story, that had names and a backstory. You know the names of the first two zombies you encounter in the series [the old cop driving you to jail and Sandra, Clementine's babysitter]; you know who they were before they are trying to eat you. That was philosophically something that helped us set the series apart right out of the gate." Those first two 'hero' zombies, along with Lee's dead brother, gave the first episode of *The Walking Dead* the necessary bite to succeed.



Telltale makes good use of in-situ storytelling, such as when you search Clem's house while listening to voicemail from her folks



THE ART OF…

Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed

Sumo Digital's trip through Sega's history was an uphill struggle



This article's images appear courtesy of game art site Dead End Thrills (www. deadendthrills.com)

Much of *Sonic & All-Stars Racing*'s success relies on capturing how we remember games of the past, rather than how they really were





Steve Lycett
Game director, Sumo Digital

Dominic Hood
Art manager, Sumo Digital

Not only does it let you drive a giant Dreamcast controller with an outboard motor, but *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed* also features a cast of dreams. Each track is a nostalgic reverie that's sized and structured according to fond memories instead of slavishly adhering to decades-old code. But despite the game's massive and slow-burning success, fans who playfully nag after missing series such as *Shenmue* and *Streets Of Rage* seldom consider the struggle of getting the formula right. A game such as this needs characters who can fit in cars, planes and boats; levels that fit around all-terrain racing, but just as importantly fit together into a progression of tracks, colours and challenges. Game director **Steve Lycett** and art manager **Dominic Hood** explain.

What's the secret recipe for 'Sega blue' skies?
Steve Lycett We've always said that it's like the most perfect version of a thing. If it's a sunny day, then it's the most beautiful sunny day – the most beautiful water, the most beautiful reflections. Ideal. Likewise, if it was a storm, it'd be the perfect version of a storm: perfect whirlwinds, cloud patterns, dust kick-up and the rest of it. When people think about Sega arcade games, you remember it as being a happy time. You've gone to the seaside, you're enjoying yourself, you're playing in an arcade. What we try to do is make it how you remember and not necessarily how it is.

[With] *Golden Axe*, the classic example is the skeleton you have as the character select screen. We said it'd be quite good to get a version of that in there, but if you look at it, it's nothing like the original character. You look at *Jet Set Radio* and it's the iconic skyline and the draw distance. In *After Burner*, obviously, it's the horizon: the amount of blue sky and blue water you've got. With each one of the levels, it's [a case of] find something iconic, then talk to the original developers. What were they aiming for when they did it? Then we kind of roll the two things together so there's a few reference points to trigger the memories, and so it's authentic to the creators' visions. Having said that, there's then so much of us poured into that to translate it into what you finally see.

Presumably the karting genre lets you pare back the characters to their older selves, too, if that suits you better?
SL When you've got so many characters and IPs, you kind of have to focus. A lot of people don't like the modern *Sonic* games because there's too much story, all these characters… Our Sonic is just some characters in cars, so we focus on the qualities of Sonic that stand out. It's

The *Sonic* tracks were a given, but that Sumo managed to make a cohesive whole from games as disparate as *Super Monkey Ball, Skies Of Arcadia, Samba De Amigo* and *House Of The Dead* is an achievement





about colour and attitude. You can't have all this exposition in there.

Dominic Hood When we first started the project, we were talking about having a story to tie everything together. But very soon – it was a relief, really – that just became, 'Let's make a good karting game.'

SL This is the craziness. We've got such a disparate set of IPs that we were looking for something we could use to tie them together. For example, the track furniture – the transform gates and the chevrons – was put in place by some omnipotent power. He pulled these bits of worlds together into one place, which is where the floating islands came from. It was this guy manipulating the laws of time and space for his pleasure, or for the pleasure of his audience… That actually did help us in a way, because it gave us a consistent theme, and there was quite a lot of pressure on us to tie a story together.

What kinds of reasons are there for certain fan favourite characters being left out?

SL I spend a lot of time out there on the forums, and it's the number one question: 'How on Earth do you pick the characters and the tracks?' The short version is that as much as we'd love to, we can't put everything in. With just 16 tracks in a game like this, what you're effectively doing is defining 16 different games' worth of look. That does take time… That's a lot of artists and quite an investment from the original developers, finding time from them to support us. When we set out, what we wanted to do with the tracks was give a journey from classic Sega to modern Sega, but also from dark to light. So the very first track in the game should be bright and breezy, but by the time we get to the last track it's going to be a bit more difficult, so we can explore darker themes.

A lot of fans out there say we don't do enough Mega Drive games. It's almost like a compliment that they think we can take just about anything and make it work in 3D. But the fact is that when you look at those games, there aren't always a lot of points of reference. There's not always guidance as to what's iconic or what stands out. *Vectorman*, for example. In its time, it was a fantastic character, a really nice-looking game, and obviously it was emulated in *Donkey Kong Country*. But as soon as you try to make that work as a 3D model and see it from behind, it's a lot of disconnected spheres. We've got to make this game bearing in mind that anyone can pick it up and empathise with the characters, and that's actually quite difficult to do. ■



What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

Why games won't eat themselves

We hear that EA is going all in on microtransactions and consider this an omen. We hear that studios are moving towards mobile over console, and this augurs something bad. These may sound like histrionic ideas, but I encounter them every day.

A kind of existential angst has taken hold in the gaming plurality, both inside and outside the industry. It says that not only is something not right, it is irrevocably broken. I mostly encounter this nameless dread in blog comments and tweets. If I post an article about changing platforms (such as smartphones), I will see responses from gamers decrying the fate of 'true' gaming. Some will be very angry, either at the companies involved or at me for writing about it. In effect, they're asking me to shut the hell up, because the very words that I am writing are contributing to the death of games.

It is the sense that games are eating themselves and that – between the Scylla of would-be Hollywood game directors and the Charybdis of social/casual moneymen – there is no course forward. That the powers that be are forgetting the charm, mechanics and heritage of games.

This uneasiness seems to have much to do with the evaporation of the mid-sized studio. Mid-sized studios were the ones who commonly spawned hit franchises back in the day, because they were big enough to do exciting things with technology, yet small enough to stay creative.

Lots of great games came from that culture, but nobody seems able to financially make it work any more. These days, the stories around games are about how some kid managed to fund an uber-fan passion project on Kickstarter, some corp landed big investment to run a massive social casino, or some ego decried gaming for not matching his standards. The spirit of mid-level studios has no place in that universe.

Nowhere is this loss felt more keenly than in the UK. There was something about British culture that used to lend small teams the ability to work miracles, but all through the 2000s that ability was no longer enough. Only a very few managed to find patrons, such as Media Molecule, or connect with enough fans to form a beachhead, such as Introversion or Jagex. Most just died.



Gambling, behaviourist games and clones may seem like Jersey Shore-ification, and to blame, but I'm not convinced

Working in the middle layer is a purgatorial existence where closure is just two cancellations away, but the alternative of social or freemium apps seems like a descent into the Abyss. I have had many a developer tell me that they would rather go broke than work on "that shit", because they want to be able to sleep at night. They just don't know how to get to that happy place where there are enough fans to keep the dream alive.

There's no clear sense of who the enemy is meant to be, but names like Zynga get dropped a lot. Also people like Jane McGonigal, David Cage or even Raph Koster. Pop up on the radar and express an opinion about how games could go and you'll get a fair bit of hate-Reddit for your troubles. Yet I often find myself empathising with the rage. Sure, gaming-as-it-was (or as one believes it was) is just nostalgia and hagiography, but those who dread are sensing something real. Gambling, behaviourist games and cloned apps may seem like the Jersey Shore-ification, and therefore to blame, but I'm not convinced. Exploitative games have been around for a while, and digital platforms only ease their distribution.

They might be functional, moneymaking but hollow experiences, but their success is not due to some grand conspiracy. Rather, they succeed because the games that are supposed to be carrying the medium forwards often don't. They have largely played themselves out, and the kind of culture that used to give rise to them has grown too expensive compared to its target market's size.

We are living at the far end of a graph predicted by Greg Costikyan in 2003 about what happens when a linear curve (the increase in the market's size) meets a geometric one (the increase in production costs). The conservatism, crisis, collapses and realignments that graph breeds is what gaming is in 2013.

Gaming may be the new pop music. Remember how the sentiment of the popular music era of the '60s morphed into the ego-slapping gargantua of the late '80s and the mechanistically engineered acts of the '90s? Games may be going through those times, devolving rather than evolving. But even in its darkest hour, pop produced some of its brightest hits. A gaming universe where culture no longer matters is a galling thing, but game culture has always found ways to express itself. If you go into a pinball museum, for instance, you'll see many examples of quirky and subversive humour wrapped up in games that were pure cash generators.

Imagination, innovation and artistry find their best voices through constraint, so perhaps we shouldn't fear so much. We tend to idolise the past, as though the old Atari games weren't developed under tight conditions, or as if Nintendo always had infinite funds. Not so. The games we lionise came from times of austerity, and it is in austere fires that legends are forged. So what are we afraid of?

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him at www.whatgamesare.com

CRYTEK

Image shows Crytek's free-to-play FPS, Warface.

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In The Click Of It



CLINT HOCKING

A rose by any other name

From time to time over the past few years, we've been treated to a heated dispute over whether or not a given game ought properly to be called a game. In the beginning, the accusation that a given work was 'not a game' was generally constrained to games coming from the indie community. Jason Rohrer's seminal *Passage* and Tale Of Tales' *The Graveyard* have both been labelled as 'not games' by a significant number of people. Recently, thechineseroom's *Dear Esther* and the arguably less 'indie' game *Journey* by thatgamecompany have been singled out as not being games, even despite the latter's status as the Game Of The Year winner at the 16th Annual DICE Awards. But the labelling does not stop with indie games. Over the past few years, people have even criticised mainstream titles such as Quantic Dream's *Heavy Rain*, Team Bondi's *LA Noire*, or even BioWare's *Mass Effect 3* as not being games in some way or another.

The disputes heated up again recently following the release of another indie game: *Proteus* by Ed Key and David Kanaga. But this time it was different. Instead of rolling over and allowing the indie darling to have its name tarnished by Internet trolls, many gamers, game developers and game critics and journalists began counter-trolling by rejecting the notion that we should label anything as 'not a game'. In some cases, there even began minor campaigns of ridicule against those taking the exclusionary stance. From my perspective, there appear to be two schools of thought here. One holds that the loose definition of the term 'videogame', or even more broadly, the term 'game', is loose in a good way. The looseness of the term is inclusive and as such allows a great deal of space for personal expression and for an exploratory approach towards development of this new medium of entertainment we call videogames.

The other school of thought takes a formalist approach to the term 'videogame' and to the term 'game' more generally. In seeking to understand the fundamental properties that differentiate games from other forms of entertainment, formalists tend to view the lack of rigor in the term 'game' as a hindrance. As mostly a formalist myself, I feel there is value in arriving at useful, though not necessarily singular, definitions of the differentiating properties of the medium. This is not because I need the validation of seeing 'videogame' properly defined in the Oxford English Dictionary, nor is it because I want to exclude or devalue in some way the work of people who are creating things that I may not technically consider to be games. In fact, for the most part, I do not care whether a given specific work is or is not a game under any given definition – it's not my goal to classify games and not-games, but to identify their fundamental properties. Identifying and understanding these fundamental properties helps me better determine how to invest my time and creative energies in working on the things that I feel are most valuable in terms of progressing the medium.



Snakes And Ladders is considered a game, but would not pass muster under most formal definitions of 'game'

Unfortunately, when the debate becomes visible on the Internet, it is usually because it has been raised with regards to the status of a given game that has recently been released. Those who are interested in and care about the discussion of whether or not we should even attempt to classify games in general – and, if so, how – have their debate drowned out by people who have taken a specific stance on a specific title. Even worse, the people most vocal in these debates have typically taken their stance not because they belong to one of the two schools mentioned above, but rather because they have strong feelings about the specific game in question. In other words, they don't care about whether there is value in identifying or defining the fundamental properties of videogames, they care about seeing this game labelled as 'not even worthy of being called a game', or conversely about ridiculing a group of detractors who they perceive as being elitist.

Following the debate surrounding *Proteus*, Ed Key himself pointed out that Snakes And Ladders is generally considered a game, but would probably not pass muster under most formal definitions of 'game'. This is an interesting observation. Similarly, Blackjack is almost certainly a game for the player, but is it a game for the casino dealer, who makes no decisions? If decision making is a fundamental property of a game, is Tic-Tac-Toe a game now that it is solved? What about Checkers, which is also solved? It seems more valuable to me to discuss whether 'decision making' is a fundamental property of games than to discuss whether or not *Proteus* or *Heavy Rain* is a game.

Regardless of your stance on whether or not there is value in formalising the distinctive qualities of videogames, we should at least agree that the time and form of the debate should not be determined by the fleeting interests of the mob. When developers or critics choose to engage in this debate, we should do so proactively, not reactively, and we should do so with an eye not towards the latest games that raised the issue, but with an eye towards the longest standing games that remain difficult to classify.

Clint Hocking lives in Seattle and works at Valve. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com


CRYTEK
WARFACE
VERSUS
CO-OP
CLANS
SHOP
LOADOUT

The Possibility Space



RANDY SMITH

The things money can't buy

Some months ago, I wrote about how indie games have finally come of age and become a viable alternative to the offerings of triple-A studios after many years of being an intriguing, but not reliably entertaining, sideline. There is another half to this dynamic, which is that mainstream games have increasingly abandoned an entire approach to using the interactive medium, a style of game design that can be exceptional.

Which is not to say that mainstream games are never great, just that they've limited themselves in what types of great they offer. Imagine you just bought a game for $60. You bring it home, pop it into the console, settle onto your couch, and what do you expect? Installation. Logo splash screens. A building sense of anticipation. A fancy animated main menu. An orchestral soundtrack. A breathtaking intro cinematic that launches you into an interactive storytelling scene training you in its gameplay. Another cutscene, with a twist, then you're finally ready for level one. It takes, what, ten to 30 minutes before you're really playing the game? It's all been sensational, so no worries. Special effects, explosions, facial animation, and subsurface scattering shaders. Let's term this a 'big spectacle' game.

But remember games like the original *Legend Of Zelda*? Or the first *Super Mario Bros*? They were also made by huge companies, also bore full price tags, but were released before there was such an emphasis on spectacle. These games had thin, short introductory phases: after 15 seconds you were playing an actual game, just as fully as you would be two hours later. There were no game modes, multiplayer or cinematics to speak of, elaborate inventory screens or skill menus, just an emphasis on pure, distilled gameplay. And I'm not waxing nostalgic for Nintendo characters or 8bit graphics, the thing that appeals to me is the sense of immediacy and the emphasis on player experience. These games feature uninterrupted engagement by the player with controls and mechanics, and the presentation facilitates an instantaneous understanding of the environment and situation. It's like a direct IV of nothing but interactivity straight into your veins. Let's call this an 'immediate' game.



I'm not waxing nostalgic for Nintendo characters, the thing that appeals to me is the emphasis on player experience

Now imagine that there are still new immediate games out there to be discovered, and a big company in 2013 stumbles upon something like *Zelda* or *Mario* that it believes will set the world on fire and become the next big thing. Can it release this game and charge $60? What will it look like if it does? It won't look like the original *Mario* any more; it's definitely going to be in a heavy 3D engine and take at least ten minutes to start properly. It'll probably interrupt gameplay over and over with invasive story elements. It's likely to have hefty piles of extraneous features, each with a tutorial you have to muddle through, only to have that power-up not get used that much. It's not going to play like a stripped-down immediate game at all. It's going to feel more like a big spectacle game, because for some reason that's what we consumers associate with big price tags. Ironically, by shoving a square peg in a round hole, the game quality would suffer for it.

And here's the flip side: if it did happen that a previously unknown immediate game was released today, who would you expect to see in the credits? An indie team. That's what indies are doing, among other things – they're returning to the roots of what made this approach to gaming great. In fact, such games come out all the time from indie teams (see: *Hotline Miami*, *Spelunky*, *Don't Starve*, *Binding Of Isaac*, *Fez*, and so on).

I should have started this column by saying "brace yourself for painful and rampant over-generalising". There are so many exceptions that this can hardly be called a rule. Steam's Indie Top Seller lists are packed with FPS mods and survival-horror games that look a lot like budget versions of triple-A games, not immediate games at all, at least not by choice. Of course, the actual *Zelda* and *Mario* franchises haven't exactly been retired, although they aren't as stripped-down as they used to be. There are big spectacle games that impress us by defying these trends, managing to keep the huge, elaborate machinery of their production quality from taking away from player experience. Take *Dead Rising*, *Dishonored*, *GTAIII*, or the various *Lego* games. In these games, the designers seem to do their best to stay out of the player's way, each fictional element balanced for brevity and interactivity, each feature adding a player-driven dimension to the gameplay, each menu as simple as it can be, and environments and scenarios tuned for readability despite the 3D cameras that view them.

Regardless of ample exceptions, there is a real phenomenon here, and it's not one of quality but of niches. Indie games don't have the budgets to compete with console games on spectacle. And triple-A games are forced to prove they are worth their large price tag, which pushes them away from raw playability and leaves behind a satisfying and popular niche I've called the immediate game, which indie games have demonstrated they are perfectly positioned to fill.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style. He has also compiled his favourite songs into a mix: www.bit.ly/VgA56n

Word Play



JAMES LEACH

The horror! The horror!

For me, it was Ben Gardner: he was the first person to really make me poop myself. Oh come on, you know who Ben Gardner is. The skipper of the 'Flicka'. The sunken boat in Jaws. It's Ben's head that pops out at Hooper, one eye gone, the other wide with terror. Even watching it now, I have to prepare for that scene.

Ever since the dawn of cinema, when Hardy first tied, er, Laurel to a railway line, film has been perfect for jump moments, tension and shocks. That's the beauty of a passive medium. You get to show, hide and otherwise mess with what the audience is experiencing, and they have to sit there, Revels in hand, and take it.

For games, though, it's different. You look where you want, go where you want and the only way to get a 'jump out of your skin' moment is to suddenly fill the screen, maze-scare style, ideally accompanied by a screamy noise. But this is easier said than done. A player creeping through a dark, scary level – checking slowly and carefully behind every tombstone, crate and red barrel – will feel cheated if, out of nowhere, a zombie-ghoul appears three inches from his face. Yes, the zombie can scamper rapidly out of the darkness ahead and attack him. That'd be a scare, and a realistic one, because you haven't checked that bit of the darkness ahead. But it's not the same scare. It's more of a fumble to hit the trigger and blow the zombie into, presumably, horse cutlets.

Let's think of a scary game. *Fallout 3* was scary. It let the suspense build and used music and audio beautifully. Plus, Liam Neeson's voice was in it. So that suspense, that wonderful feeling of not knowing when the next thing would happen, that's how a game is scary? Yes, better than freaking people the freak out with simple jump moments. Imagine if Spielberg's Jaws had featured more severed heads than a Mexican cartel video – by the end you'd have been yawning and happily able to eat ketchuppy overcooked cauliflower out of a bowl modelled on a bloodstained skull. You can't overdo jumps.

Silent Hill was scary, I've just remembered. *Resident Evil* (most of them), too. Oh, and *Dead Space*. If I was thinking of creating a small list, I've failed. But in the interest of providing some insight, I'm ploughing on because I suggest that all these games rely on traditionally scary places. Asylums, post-apocalyptic wastes, gore-stained cemeteries, Luton: all shorthand for fearful locales.



Poe and Lovecraft got it. Haunting ideas, when given space, can work as well in games as they can in film

And because it's you going into the dark, horrific recesses, you get to choose how you feel about it. In books, films, telly and stuff, you see the terrified kids, or the weepy girl, wobble widdle-pantedly into the forest of flesh-ripping death. You know how ill-equipped they are, both mentally and physically. But you're a player, and if this is a game then you're already one up on them, because you know you've got the ability to put the smackdown on what's out there. Sure, it might involve some tactical withdrawing to reload and even the eating of some convenient roast chicken icons to restore health, but you won't die. Some of the kids in the 'let's go camping at Adolf Dracula's cut-off cabin of murder' film are simply destined to die. You're too busy working and winning to get the fear as it is meant to be experienced.

The games that scared me did so because I wanted to be scared. I chose to play late at night, with lights off, headphones on. Oh, perhaps a quick you know. And when I was done, load the game and let's go. (Come on, I was younger and not yet filled with self-loathing.) But I had made the decision to let myself be scared, since that added to the experience. We all like being scared in a semi-controlled way, hence rollercoasters.

What really works for the committed gamer with a brain – he is out there; get in touch, mate, if you read this – is not the jumping and the 'Where did he come from?' yelps. It's the deeply unsettling ideas. In *Thief: Deadly Shadows*, there was a place called Shalebridge Cradle. Yep, good name. It was an orphanage, then branched out and added an insane asylum, while still being an orphanage. Genius. And the little children shared many of the spaces with the lunatics.

And one night it burned down, and in the remains they found a chair, perfectly angled so the sitter could watch the flames spread and the destruction and death take hold.

Poe and Lovecraft got it. Haunting ideas, when given space to do their haunting, can work as well in games as they can in film. I, for one, would prefer to be creeped in a game not by, 'Jeebus, where did that come from?' but by, 'Holy mother of God, what were they doing in this place?' Worn hooks, anchored to a wall. A collection of slightly used little shoes. Unopened letters and presents from relatives. This isn't preparation for a series of jump moments. This isn't even traditional gaming. It's pure atmosphere.

But remember, you're wandering through this place alone. Whatever happened, sickening though it is, is long in the past. And that's when you catch sight of something and it races towards you with murder in its ancient eyes.

Yep, games can be scary. I think I might, you know, sleep with the light on tonight. Just for a change. Honestly, I'm OK.

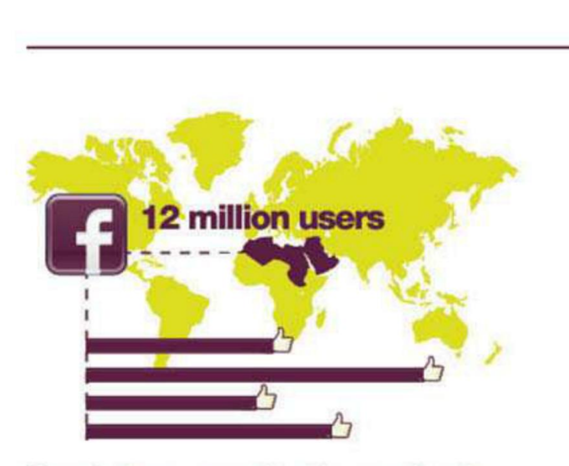
James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online

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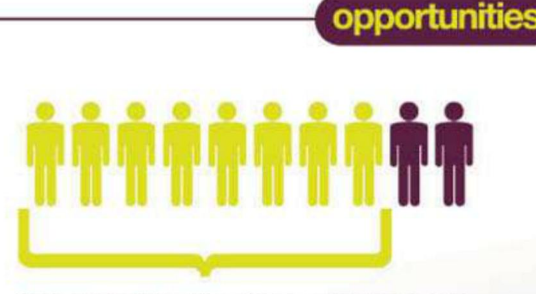
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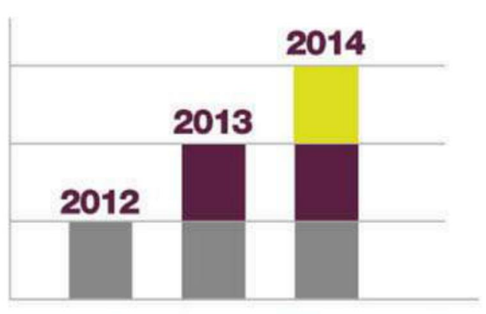
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Currently there are over 12 million users from the Arab world on Facebook's social games



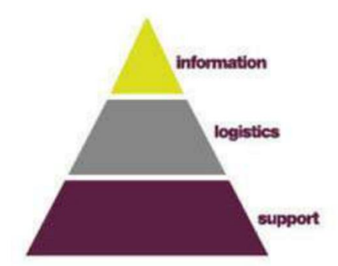
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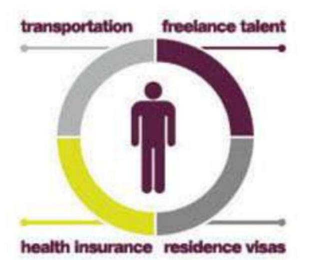
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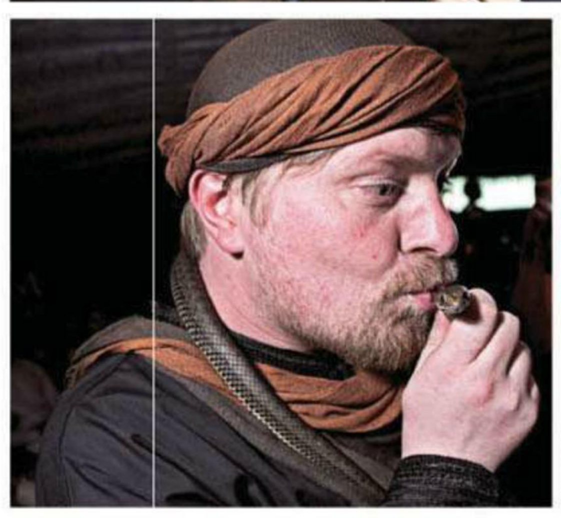


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**Sources: Arab Media Outlook, 2010. Media on the Move 2009, A.T. Kearney. Introduction to Gaming, Michael Moore. Screen Digest IDC. Arab Advisors Group, 2010. PricewaterhouseCoopers, Global Entertainment and Media Outlook 2011. PricewaterhouseCoopers 2012.*







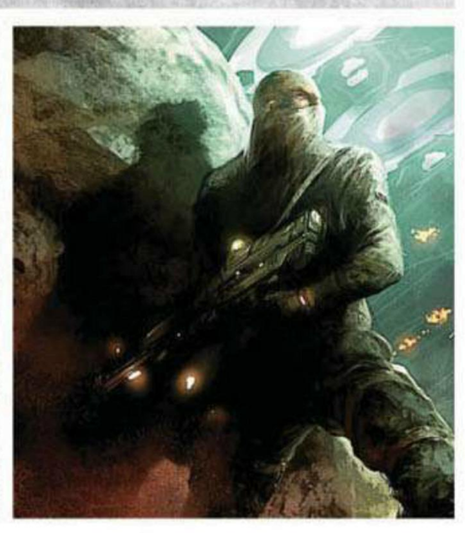



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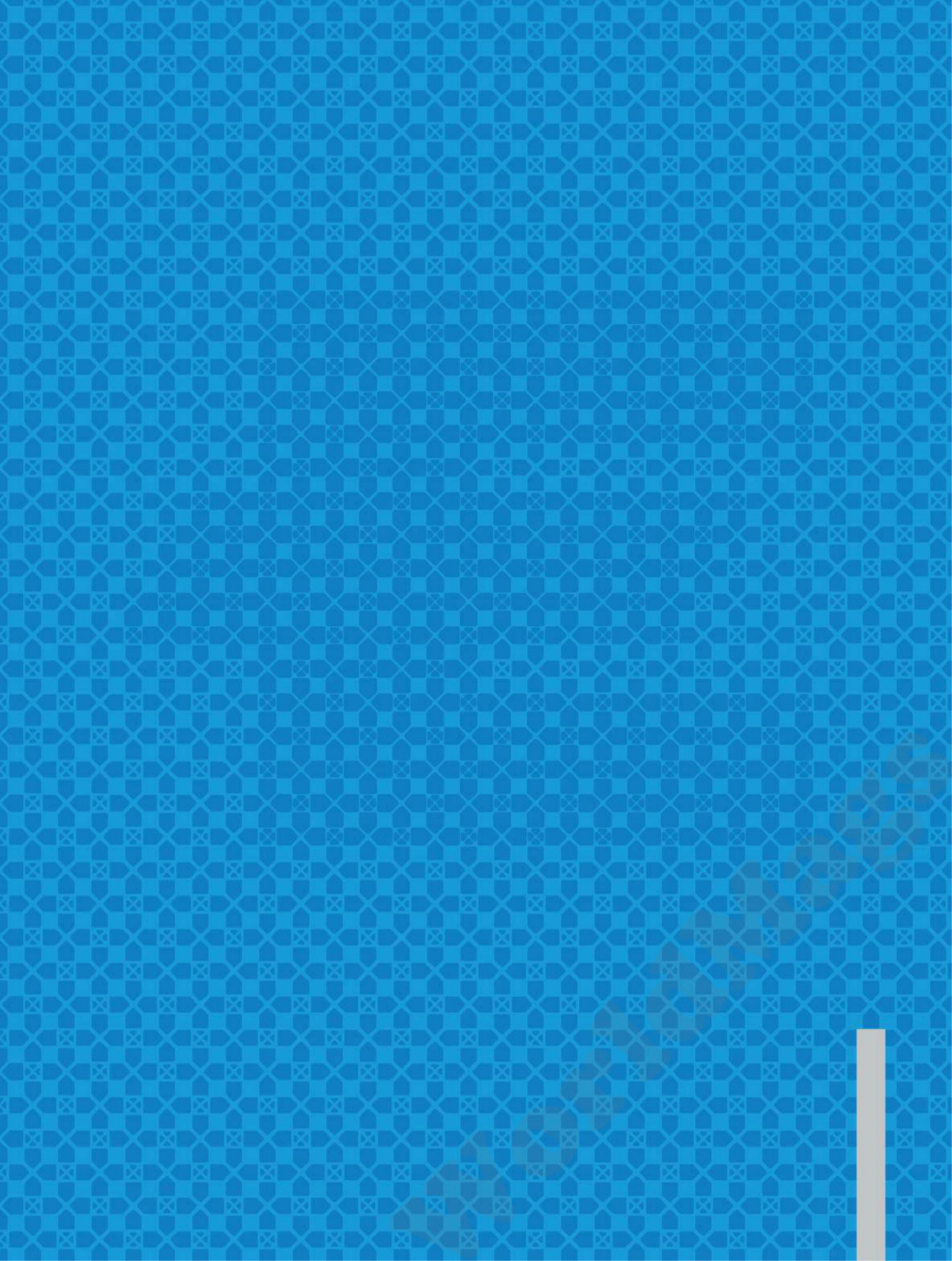







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Designed in collaboration with Sony's development partners, DualShock 4 is the most ambitiously featured controller ever produced for a console system. Inside, we discover what its unique set of attributes means for PS4

